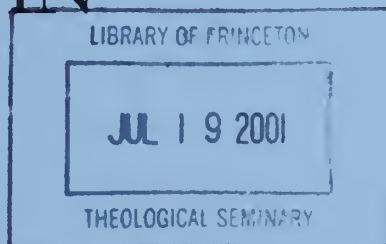


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VOLUME XXII NUMBER 2 NEW SERIES 2001



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WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

WICAM LECTURE
Naming God She: The Theological Implications

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Mixed Messages: Encountering *Mestizaje* in the
Old Testament

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The Princeton Seminary Bulletin is published three times annually by Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey.

Each issue is mailed free of charge to all alumni/ae and, by agreement, to various institutions. Back issues are not available.

All correspondence should be addressed to Stephen D. Crocco, Editor, *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, P.O. Box 821, Princeton, NJ 08542-0803; e-mail: seminary.bulletin@ptsem.edu.

The Princeton Seminary Bulletin publishes lectures and sermons by Princeton Theological Seminary faculty and administrators and presentations by guests on the Seminary campus. Therefore, we do not accept unsolicited material.

This periodical is indexed in the *ATLA Religion Database*, published by the American Theological Library Association, 250 S. Wacker Dr., 16th Flr., Chicago, IL 60606; e-mail: atla@atla.com, WWW: <http://www.atla.com/>.

(I)chabod Departed

by WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

Walter Brueggemann is William Marcel-lus McPheeters Professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary. He is the author of numerous books, most recently of the commentary on 1 & 2 Kings in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary series (2000). This essay is the first of his five Stone Lectures, delivered on February 12, 2001, in Miller Chapel.

THE QUESTION OF what the church is doing and is to do when it stands before a biblical text is a complicated, contested, and endlessly important question. It is a perennial and recurring question, and the answer to it has some constant contours. At the same time, however, the question evokes and requires different nuances of response in different contexts. There is no doubt that the question is a peculiarly urgent one in our church setting in the west—given the seismic transformations in western culture, the complete reformulation of socioeconomic relations in the face of new technologies, and the pressures, threats, and opportunities of the new globalism and its consequent pluralism.

In these lectures I will seek to respond to that question, not because I think I can give any satisfying answer, but because I believe that a company such as this has no more important work than to struggle together with that endlessly contested issue. I understand that the question finally receives its serious answer, not in such reflective venues as this, but in the actual practice of the church as it takes up matters of missional obedience. But then, this company is more or less a form of the church asking about missional obedience. Therefore, the issue is a proper one, even in this venue.

I.

The so-called “Ark Narrative” of 1 Samuel 4–6 begins with a sweeping move of Israel’s descent into loss.¹ The purported reportage invites the listening community gathered around the text into deep loss. The narrative moves, sentence by sentence, deep into loss, clear to the bottom of loss, as far as the narrator is able to imagine loss. The narrative serves to line out the remembered loss of the listening congregation in every new hearing of experienced loss, to name and give form to loss that may be deeply felt but

¹ On the Ark Narrative, see Leonhard Rost, *The Succession to the Throne of David* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1982), 6–34; Antony F. Campbell, *The Ark Narrative* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1975); and Patrick D. Miller Jr. and J. J. M. Roberts, *The Hand of the Lord: A Reassessment of the “Ark Narrative” of 1 Samuel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

nonetheless inchoate. Moreover, the narrative summons the texted community beyond its own loss to a more primordial loss that is available only in the studied, daring imagination of the narrative. Thus, I take up the beginning of the Ark Narrative to consider the ways in which the text—and its reiterated telling in the church—provides an expression of extremity, a “limit expression,” in order to give access to bewildered grief at the limit that is beyond the reach of either critical analysis or reasonable explanation.²

The tale of loss, if we accept the critical judgment of Patrick Miller and J. J. M. Roberts, is already voiced and underway in 1 Samuel 2.³ Against the older critical consensus going back to Leonhard Rost, Miller and Roberts include 1 Sam 2:12–17, 22–25, 27–36 as an introduction to that particular narrative. These earlier verses focus on the failures of the priest Eli and the affronts of his sons; they declare that Hophni and Phinehas must die, and, with them, the priestly house of Eli must be terminated.

The judgment brought by the narrative against the sons, partly voiced by their father, is a classic formulation of a prophetic speech of judgment.⁴ The *indictment* against the sons is that “they had no regard for the Lord or for the duties of the priests to the people” (2:12–13). This disregard was expressed as an exploitative self-indulgence concerning meat brought for sacrifices to the Lord, a sin that is “very great in the eyes of the Lord” (2:17). This exploitative economic act is matched, not surprisingly, by sexual misconduct: “They lay with the women who served at the entrance of the tent of meeting” (2:22). The violations of money and sexuality characteristically come together. For this affront Eli rebukes his sons, but they would not listen. Thus, verses 12–17, 22–25 voice the indictment.

The *sentence* against them, given in the next paragraph, is sweeping and uncompromising:

See, a time is coming when I will cut off your strength and the strength of your ancestor's family, so that no one in your family will live to old age. Then in distress you will look with greedy eye on all the prosperity that shall be bestowed on Israel; and no one in your family shall ever live to old age. . . . The fate of your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, shall be the sign to you—both of them shall die on the same day. (2:31–32, 34)

² On the phrase “limit expression” understood in relation to “limit experience,” see Paul Ricoeur, “Biblical Hermeneutics,” *Semeia* 4 (1975): 107–45.

³ Miller and Roberts, *Hand of the Lord*, 27–31 and *passim*.

⁴ The standard study of the genre is by Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967).

The most remarkable feature of this sentence of termination is that it is played against the former unconditional promise that YHWH had made to this house: "I promised that your family and the family of your ancestor should go in and out before me forever" (v. 30). The conduct of the sons is so outrageous, however, that even this unconditional promise previously voiced by YHWH to Eli must now be voided. The voiding of an unconditional promise of YHWH is, of course, an extremity. The pattern of indictment and sentence is clear and complete. We are only to await the enactment of the judgment with its loss that is sure to follow in the narrative.

The sentence is reiterated in the following chapter, in the very different account of the dream-oracle of the boy Samuel:

On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever. (3:12-14)

The Ark Narrative continues in 4:1-2 with an implementation of the judgment. Israel is at war with the Philistines, of course. Israel is at war, theologically construed, in order to maintain its distinctive identity as YHWH's people in the land. The report is terse. Israel was defeated by the Philistines; about four thousand Israelites were slaughtered. The narrative does not explicitly connect the defeat to the preceding; if, however, we move from 1 Samuel 2, then this defeat is a rather inexact, clumsy implementation of the severe sentence against the priestly house. The sons of Eli are not mentioned in this battle report; but many Israelites were slain.

I linger over this brief introductory battle report only to notice that it is conventional and needs no particular comment. It reports loss that is, with Chapter 2, completely contained in a prophetic lawsuit; the historical sweep of defeat is well-placed by the narrative as punishment for guilt:

The sin was very great in the eyes of the Lord. (2:17)

If someone sins against the Lord, who can make intercession? (2:25)

No one in your family will live to old age. (2:31)

The iniquity of the house of Eli shall not be expiated by sacrifice. (3:14)

Loss well-placed under the rubric of guilt constitutes no severe theological problem for Israel and not much of a burdensome pastoral dilemma. Loss situated in trusted moral coherence is bearable and credible. No problem so

far, except a few “acceptable deaths.” These few “acceptable deaths” push to no extremity and do not evoke wonderments about theodicy.

II.

Of course, the narrative is now only at its beginning. Now Israel, according to the narrative, moves beyond the symmetrical calculus of covenant. The Israelites, routed and bewildered in their defeat, make a second effort against the Philistines (vv. 3–11). They bring the ark of the covenant into the battle camp, the ark upon which sits the invisible deity in whom Israel has complete confidence. The stakes are upped considerably by the palpable presence of YHWH, as the narrative now moves beyond the rubric of guilt. As the ark is introduced—into the camp and into the narrative—the narrative takes pains to identify this fresh initiative that piles up self-conscious theological phrasing:

Let us bring *the ark of the covenant* of the Lord here from Shiloh, so that he may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies. So the people sent to Shiloh, and brought from there the ark of the covenant of *the Lord of hosts*, who is *enthroned on the cherubim*. (4:3b–4a)⁵

The ark is now present, and its purpose is to “save” (יִשָּׁע) from the hand of the enemy (v. 3). The specific focus on Eli’s sons is now forgotten, with attention only on the Philistine threat to Israel. The narrative begins to move well beyond the scope of the oracle of judgment in the earlier chapters. The ark is welcomed into the Israelite camp with a mighty shout. The Israelites are buoyant, exuberant, and confident.

Israelite exuberance has its counterpoint in the Philistine response to the shout (vv. 7–9). The Philistines promptly learn that the ark is the occasion of the Israelite shout. The Philistines, well schooled in Israelite history and theology, respond in fear, as well they might. The Philistines in this narrative, as David Jobling has shown, are the totally, threatening, unclean “other.”⁶ They embody everything that contradicts and negates Israel and the God of Israel. They may be a historical enemy, but we should not miss that they are the paradigmatic enemy that seeks to live life outside the covenantal realities of Israel, an “otherness” signified by a lack of circumcision. In their otherness, they constitute deep challenge and threat to Israel.

⁵ For a review of the divine names in their several formulations, see Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *In Search of God: The Meaning and Message of the Everlasting Names* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

⁶ David Jobling, *1 Samuel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1998), 197–243.

Here, in their alienness, the Philistines perform an odd role to contribute to Israelite exuberance. First, they know, as well as any Israelite, the exodus story. They may have read Torah or perhaps have observed a Passover. They know that the "gods of Israel" have defeated the mighty power of Egypt. They know that the exodus was a God-given reversal of political power; they themselves, moreover, become candidates for slavery if they, like Egypt, are defeated by YHWH. Therefore, second, they cry out in their fear, "Woe . . . woe," a short-term phrase that alludes to the dread of death. The Philistines know that the God of life, the Lord of the exodus, takes no prisoners but destroys all those who resist the new sovereignty. The Philistines are the paradigmatic resisters now under threat. The God of Israel will eliminate "the other." The Philistines in response, however, do not wilt but brace for battle. The Philistines' appearance serves to enhance the God of Israel and to lead us to expect that the defeat of Israel in 4:1-2 will be reversed in Israel's favor.

Now the narrative report takes a curious turn (vv. 10-11). The battle is joined, and Israel is defeated. The Israelites flee home out of the reach of the Philistines. Thirty thousand die, dwarfing the figure of four thousand in the first encounter. If this is judgment against Eli's house, it is blatantly disproportionate and unbearably extreme. The battle report of 4:10-11 is not yet finished. It concludes with the final report that we have anticipated: "The two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died." That was to be expected; the enactment of the oracle of judgment against the house of Eli is complete.

But the penultimate scene of the report is stunning: "The ark of God was captured!" (v. 11). This turn of affairs is completely unanticipated, not signaled by anything heretofore in the text. It is surely unanticipated by the exuberant Israelites. It is equally unanticipated by the frightened Philistines. We are not told, but apparently the defeat was quite unanticipated as well by the God of the covenant who must have taken the Philistines to be an easy mark after the Egyptians. The narrative, in verse 11, nicely joins these two outcomes that refuse to be joined. Concerning Hophni and Phinehas, the outcome is expected and fits the taxonomy of guilt. The capture of the ark, however, is well beyond any such calculus. Now the story moves completely out of the grid of guilt.

For the remainder of the chapter we are kept aware of the fate of the house of Eli. The judgment on the priestly house is complete. The surplus, however, concerns the ark. The two themes remain twinned, priesthood subordinated to ark.

The report is given to the old man, Eli, who has heard and wondered about the cry now on the lips of Israel: "Your two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas,

are dead, and the ark of God has been captured" (v. 17). Eli's response to the loss of the ark is, of course, astonishment. He falls over, breaks his neck, and dies. The text that says his response is not to the death of his sons, which he expects. It is his response to the fate of the ark, a fate beyond his imagining. He dies. He is, we are told, *heavy* (*kābad*; v. 18).

The same news is told to Eli's unnamed daughter-in-law, wife of Phinehas. She also learns of the double failure, death to her husband and father-in-law, capture of the ark. Then she gives birth. Her labor pains are overwhelming. The father-in-law, upon hearing the news of the battle, comes to death. The daughter-in-law, upon hearing the same news, comes to birth. Both are pushed to extremity: one to death, one to birth, both pushed out of the ordinary by news for which they had no categories of reception or understanding.

The narrative is insistent and does not want us to miss the main point:

The report: "The ark of God was captured." (v. 11)

The report to Eli: "The ark of God has been captured." (v. 17)

The report to the daughter-in-law: "The ark of God was captured." (v. 19)

The response of the daughter-in-law, in extremity, because: "The ark of God had been captured." (v. 21)

The narrator explains, at the end of the chapter, her extreme response, because: "The ark of God has been captured." (v. 22)

Five times, "the ark of God has been captured." There is no mistake and no denial: the ark of God has been captured!

This devastation has nothing to do with earlier judgment against the house of Eli. There has been, in mobilization against the Philistines, a gross miscalculation. The Israelites in their joy never doubted the efficacy of YHWH's ark. The Philistines matched Israelite joy with their own fear; they also did not doubt. YHWH, on the ark, has moved boldly into the field of combat. But then, wholesale slaughter. We are given a quick, wild battle scene, strewn with bodies, frantic, escaping soldiers, blood, and crying. In the midst of it all is the ark, taken by the Philistines as a trophy. It is a moment of loss well beyond guilt. It is, indeed, a moment of loss beyond faith. It is a moment of loss that defies theological coherence, a loss underneath all losses. The loss invites the unthinkable, that YHWH could not manage, did not prevail, was not strong enough, did not care enough, could not cope. Miller and Roberts say it well enough: "YHWH, represented in the form of the ark, seems to have bowed to the superior might of the Philistines' gods . . . the abandonment by YHWH of his people in recognition of that superiority [of

Dagon].⁷ Everything has come to an end. It was no final loss in Israel for the priestly house to go under. But now Israel's point of reference, Israel's *raison d'être* in the world, is all gone.

The nameless daughter-in-law voices the loss (4:21). Her women companions try to reassure her in this liminal moment, when the baby is born and the mother dies, but "she did not answer or heed" (v. 20). What she senses of loss outdistances their assurance. Her last gasp is for naming the child, a moment of desperate awareness and acknowledgment. She will not be talked out of her pathos-filled truth-telling by their assurances. She calls the new baby *'î-kābôd*, "Where is the glory?" The familiar translations of the name give answer to the question; but, in fact, she only asks the question in the name, "Where?" The answer, given in the next clause, is: "Nowhere! Not here—the glory is gone!"

This is an extraordinary piece of theology by this dying, unnamed daughter-in-law. She has grasped the point of the capture of the ark and its nearly unutterable significance. After the accent on "save" in verse 3, we might have expected her to say that YHWH's capacity to save has gone. But no, she says "glory." She understands that the issue is not *Israel's* future, but *YHWH's* own loss. It is YHWH who has been shamed and humiliated, and who has lost credence. She is, moreover, a better Yahwistic theologian than the Philistines, for the Philistines had thought like generic theologians and had assumed that YHWH, like every God, goes from victory to victory. The daughter-in-law, however, knows that this God is exposed and vulnerable, not generically sovereign, but vulnerable to the vagaries of historical challenge. She ponders the deep disruption in the very character of YHWH, the one completely at risk in the risk of Israel.

Her use of the term *kābôd* is astonishing. If we can date texts at all, she is among the first to use it. Later, the term will be a way of speaking of YHWH's *power and splendor* as a mighty force (see Exod 14:4, 17–18; Isa 26:5; Ezek 28:22; 39:13). But not yet. Later, the term will be a way of speaking of solemn, *sure cultic presence*, as in Exod 40:34; Lev 9:6, 23; Num 14:10—but not yet, not yet made familiar currency by professional theologians. Before the theologians could do their work, here the term sits on the lips of this nameless woman. She uses this word so freighted with awe, splendor, majesty, and sovereignty only to negate. It describes only loss that is inscrutable, only loss that drops the bottom out of Israel's buoyancy and gives the lie to Philistine fear. The glory of YHWH was to cohere and guarantee and assure. Now it has failed, leaving a dead husband, a dead father-in-law, a routed

⁷ Miller and Roberts, *Hand of the Lord*, 42–3.

army, a field of abandoned bodies, all topped by a humiliated God become an enemy trophy. In her last moment she sees all this. She says, "Where?" and she dies. Dying, she knows the answer: not anywhere that matters.

She has yet one more surprise in her acumen. Our familiar phrasing of her justification of the odd name of the child is "the glory has departed." But that is not quite right. What she says is: "The glory has gone into exile (*glb*) from Israel . . . for it has been taken." Neither she in verse 21 nor the narrator in verse 22 bothers to identify the agent: "taken" by whom? Everyone knows. It is the Philistines, the uncircumcised, polluting Philistines, the unbearable "other" whose very presence pollutes and demeans. Now YHWH is helpless, leaving Israel void of succor or hope. YHWH is taken against YHWH's own will, under the power of another, a captured trophy. One can picture the ark and its invisible occupant, perhaps in a caged wagon, the God of exodus looking wearily between the bars as the procession moves toward Ashdod—or, not on a wagon, but staggering in despair in the long, humiliating walk to Dagon's shrine. The daughter-in-law dies; her death in bodily ways matches the fate of Israel and the condition of Israel's God: humiliated, shamed, powerless, void of conventional claims, absent of the marks of splendor to which Israel had become accustomed in its God.

The narrative pauses before 5:1, perhaps because the trek from the battlefield of Ebenezer-Aphek to the shrine at Ashdod is too long. In any case, the Philistines are in no hurry, for they relish each triumphal step. Israel, by contrast, has spiraled down into loss, death, and despair. The loss is not any longer aligned with Israel's guilt. This is not covenantal judgment, for in the preceding narrative YHWH has not offered any such massive condemnation to justify this drama. It is simply failure. The narrative requires a dying moment to speak the deathliness beyond every reason. The categories of morality that might explain have been superseded. Now there is only loss, shock, bewilderment, abandonment, and, finally, silence: silence all the way into the night, awaiting the dawn of Chapter 5.

III.

I have taken this long in reading this text—perhaps overreading—because I believe it to be one of the most powerful broodings about loss in the entire Old Testament. I believe, moreover, that the *full embrace of loss*, so characteristic in Israel's faith, is one of the most urgent and important tasks left to the church and its ministry in our society. I wish now to extrapolate in two directions from this narrative that culminates with the utterance of this stunningly perceptive, unnamed, dying theologian. I consider, first, extrap-

olations of an intertextual variety, within Israel's ancient canonical text. Second, I make some forays beyond the scope of Israel's text.

My first extrapolation is to suggest that this narrative of loss is one access point into the larger field of *loss that preoccupies Israel*. That is, I wish to consider the canonical futures evoked by this text, while begging the question of whether this text is early. It is, in any case, clear that this text is not only about itself—as Israel's texts never are—it insists also on making contact with other texts. The narrative invites reflection on the way in which this believing literature requires reference to other texts. I shall identify five of these others in order to locate our text.

There is no doubt that this text intends connections to, first, the exodus narrative. Indeed, as an anti-exodus text, perhaps it is a cautionary tale about making too much of the exodus.⁸ The narrative permits the Philistines to introduce the exodus theme: "Who can deliver us from the power of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with every sort of plague in the wilderness" (4:8). The Philistines know the credo news from Israel, perhaps having read Gerhard von Rad. They know that YHWH "acts in history" and has been powerful against established power. They fully anticipate that always and everywhere, here and now, YHWH will replicate that wonder of the exodus. The lips of the Philistines, the abhorrent other, mouth a doxology toward YHWH that is parallel to that of that other great unqualified outsider, Rahab (Josh 2:9–13).

More than that, the Philistines are capable of connecting theology to lived social reality; they call for courage "in order not to become slaves to the Hebrews as they have been to you" (v. 9). They understand that the splendor of YHWH has to do with social power and economic relationships. They understand, moreover, that commensurate with a God who overturns power is a people that will subjugate others. The Philistines are here made to be an anticipation of the Marxian awareness that "the criticism of religion is indeed the criticism of political power." The Philistines expect—perhaps require—YHWH to be engaged in the conventional contest of domination. This present narrative undermines an overreading of the exodus narrative, as though Israelite faith is always, everywhere about winning. Exodus is not so readily replicated, and this God is now seen to be more nuanced—and more vulnerable—than a flat exodus doxology might allow. The narrative, so to say, deconstructs the God of the exodus.

⁸ See William L. Moran, "The End of the Unholy War and the Anti-Exodus," in *A Song of Power and the Power of Song: Essays on the Book of Deuteronomy*, ed. Duane L. Christensen (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1993), 147–55.

Second, the double use of "exile" (*glb*) in verses 21–22 inescapably must be taken as an allusion to sixth-century exile, surely the defining, lived reality of Old Testament Israel.⁹ There is now great uneasiness about the term "exile" among those scholars who engage in ideology criticism because, it is said, the term is not historically accurate but a self-serving ideological mantra among a small party of elites.¹⁰ Perhaps; but it is difficult to imagine this nameless woman among such elites. In any case, this narrative, now placed in the so-called Deuteronomistic History, anticipates the ending of Israel's royal narrative in exile, knowing in its own primitive formulation all that is to befall Israel in time to come.

Whatever may be said about the term "exile," there is no serious doubt that there was a deep hiatus in the sixth century when Israel lost its temple, its monarchy, and all its conventional props and certitudes that had given dignity to its theological claims. "Exile" is that moment when the glory is gone, when Israel must learn to live without God in the world. The exile, here given in inchoate form, raised deep, abiding, and unanswerable questions for Israel that Israel must endlessly ponder: What have we done to warrant this (a question endlessly answered by the Deuteronomists and the prophets)? How shall we live now in deep displacement? What now do we know about God, from whom our way is hid (Isa 40:27), whose hand seems shortened (Isa 50:2), and who has forsaken and forgotten (Isa 49:14)? How may we hope, or is this all that there is?

These questions were a long time being formed in Israel, a longer time in being embraced, and yet a much longer time in being answered. The circumstance of departed glory generated competing interpretive traditions (sects), a vigorous kind of pluralism that would do battle for the future; the circumstance of exile evoked immense imaginative generativity in which Israel created its sacred corpus. From the evidence it is clear that this is a people candidly driven to its loss that has the energy and freedom to push to newness, an energy and freedom not yet given to those on the safe side of loss.

Third, and more specifically, the departure of glory surely alludes to, or is taken up by, Ezekiel, the prophet who attended most to YHWH's glory. By

⁹ K. A. D. Smelik, "The Ark Narrative Reconsidered," in *New Avenues in the Study of the Old Testament*, ed. A. S. van der Woode (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 128–44. Smelik connects the Ark Narrative to the exile and regards it as a parable of the Babylonian exile.

¹⁰ See the discussions of Hans M. Barstad, *The Myth of the Empty Land: A Study in the History and Archaeology of Judah During the "Exilic" Period* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1996); James M. Scott, ed., *Exile: Old Testament, Jewish, and Christian Conceptions* (New York: Brill, 1997); and Lester L. Grabbe, ed., *Leading Captivity Captive: "The Exile" as History and Ideology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

the time of Ezekiel, Israel had a well-developed theology of temple presence that is not on the horizon of the Ark Narrative. By the time of Ezekiel, “glory” that had to do with leverage and contested power has been transposed into static presence, a presence celebrated in the tabernacle of Exodus 40, a visible, palpable sense of YHWH’s indwelling, life-guaranteeing presence in the sanctuary.

Of course, Ezekiel ponders that palpable, life-guaranteeing presence only to draw negative conclusions.¹¹ In Ezekiel 8, the prophet is given a tour of the Jerusalem temple. He finds there such a compromised religious practice that neither he nor YHWH can tolerate it, and he can scarcely speak about it. Ezekiel witnesses abominations, greater abominations, and “still greater abominations” (vv. 13, 15). The inevitable conclusion in such violated presence is, of course, judgment: “Therefore I will act in wrath; my eye will not spare, nor will I have pity; and though they cry in my hearing with a loud voice, I will not listen to them” (v. 18).

In Ezekiel 9, the judgment is to be implemented with the death of those who compromised. Two notations are important: exceptions are made for those who “sigh and groan” over what has happened (v. 4), and it is asserted that YHWH “has abandoned the land” (v. 9). The land is now bereft of the glory that has guaranteed life.

In Ezekiel 10, the abandonment of Jerusalem by YHWH is graphically articulated: “Then the glory of the Lord rose up from the cherub to the threshold of the house; the house was filled with the cloud, and the court was full of the brightness of the glory of the Lord. The sound of the wings of the cherubim was heard as far as the outer court, like the voice of God Almighty when he speaks” (10:4–5). YHWH has dramatically, physically, quite publicly left the city, the place of presence. YHWH cannot and will not stay where YHWH’s glory is cheapened and mocked. So the city is left absent. YHWH, moreover, is made into an exile, driven by YHWH’s own people far away. In an important way, Ezekiel plays upon and expositis the theme of the Ark Narrative. The glory has indeed departed. At the same time, we may be instructed by the important contrast between these two dramas of departure. In the Ark Narrative YHWH is weak and overwhelmed, left vulnerable to the greater power of Dagon. Of course, that great Calvinist, Ezekiel, could never countenance weakness on the part of YHWH: with him, it is YHWH’s initiative to depart—not to be denied glory, but to give it up.

¹¹ See Ralph W. Klein, *Ezekiel: The Prophet and His Message* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), esp. 52–71.

Ezekiel's statement of the initiative of YHWH nonetheless permits us to raise the question: Why was YHWH in the Ark Narrative so vulnerable to capture? The answer surely must be that Israel's sins did not adequately serve and honor, and where Israel's adherence to YHWH is diminished, YHWH's glory is by that much diminished, until, in the extremity of the Ark Narrative, YHWH is completely exposed in weakness. For whatever difference of nuance, our narrative sets out a theme of absence that comes to fruition in Ezekiel. In our narrative, the absence evokes the wretched final cry of the woman in labor. In Ezekiel the same absence reduces the prophet to muteness (Ezek 24:25-27).¹² The prophet cannot speak as long as the absence prevails, as long as the glory is gone, as long as the city is exposed to death. Absence brings loss of voice and the shrinking of the capacity of the prophet.

Fourth, still on the theme of exile, linkages can be made between our narrative and the poetry of Lamentations. We have seen that the first defeat at the hands of the Philistines is surely punishment for guilty Israel (1 Sam 4:1-2). Then, in the second defeat, a rout by the Philistines that includes the ark, the narrative moves beyond guilt and ends in a flood of grief, for "the ark of God has been captured" (v. 11). Guilt will explain the loss only up to a certain point. Indeed, the narrative is not so mesmerized by guilt as some interpreters incline.

The move from guilt to grief is not an easy one. It requires the move from an explainable symmetry to a depth of loss that resists any moralizing explanation. Defeat can be connected to the sons of Eli; but the capture of the ark admits no such linkage and ends in grief. The same move is evident in Lam 3:40-66 concerning the loss of the city. There is no doubt that, at first glance, the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 can be understood in the prophetic calculus of indictment and sentence, a point accented by the Deuteronomists. In Lamentations 3, moreover, the accent on guilt is not ducked:

We have transgressed and rebelled,
and you have not forgiven.
You have wrapped yourself with anger and pursued us,
killing without pity. (vv. 42-43)

Guilt, however, is sustainable for only so long. Very soon the dread depth of failure and absence moves dramatically from guilt to grief that includes no moral dimension. Thus, by verse 49, the poet asserts:

¹² See Robert R. Wilson, "An Interpretation of Ezekiel's Dumbness," *Vetus Testamentum* 22 (1972): 91-104.

My eyes will flow without ceasing,
 without respite, . . .
 My eyes cause me grief
 at the fate of all the young women in my city. (vv. 49, 51)

The poet now situates Israel as a helpless and innocent victim of enemies who assault “without cause” (*hnm*):

Those who were my enemies without cause
 have hunted me like a bird;
 they flung me alive into a pit
 and hurled stones on me;
 water closed over my head;
 I said, “I am lost.” . . .
 You have seen the wrong done to me, O Lord;
 judge my cause,
 You have seen all their malice,
 all their plots against me. (vv. 52–54, 59–60)

This is the voice of loss that no longer offers moral justification, a sadness, a need, a reaching, a yearning that is down to the bottom and unreasonable, regressive beyond the norms of obedience.¹³ That is the same move made in our narrative. No longer is there any interest in Eli’s sons, no longer any interest in justification or explanation, only the stark awareness that the loss has cut beneath prophetic calculus to God’s own life, power, and glory. This is no longer the vulnerable appealing to the reliable, but now all are vulnerable and bereft.

Fifth, if we see the line that runs from our narrative via Ezekiel to the exile and to the book of Lamentations, surely we may move more generally from Lamentations to lament and complaint, the voice of desperation and loss. That voice is beyond confession, short on doxology, with only enough speech left to sound loss, voice situated in absence, daring yet to speak to promised presence, promised but not now palpable or convincing:

I am distraught by the noise of the enemy,
 because of the clamor of the wicked.
 For they bring trouble upon me,
 and in anger they cherish enmity against me.
 My heart is in anguish within me,

¹³ On the depth and regression of such grief, see Tod Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations: A Literary-Theological Study of the Afterlife of a Biblical Text* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

the terrors of death have fallen upon me.
 Fear and trembling come upon me,
 and horror overwhelms me. (Ps 55:2-5)

All day long they seek to injure my cause;
 all their thoughts are against me for evil.
 They stir up strife, they lurk,
 they watch my steps. (Ps 56:5-6a)

Even now they lie in wait for my life;
 the mighty stir up strife against me.
 For no transgression or sin of mine, O Lord,
 for no fault of mine, they run and make ready. (Ps 59:3-4)

These many prayers that live at the edge of the church's horizon are acknowledgments that the glory has departed. Israel knows unmistakably about departed glory, as does every attentive, candid pastor.¹⁴

These protests are, in the end, acts of hope.¹⁵ But it is hope that is regressive and not usually buoyant. It is hope that bargains, that withholds praise and seeks to leverage, that promises to thank, and that intends to bear witness—but not yet, not soon, not until the glory acts to heal. It turns out, in the candor of Israel, that the Philistines and Dagon, the God of the Philistines, take many forms, generally “enemy,” enemy enough to dominate, adversary enough to preempt the space of YHWH. Israel is left with the voice of a shrieking woman: “Alas, alas, departed, gone, exiles. Where is *kābôd*?”

It is clear that this narrative of loss and exile in 1 Samuel 4 is a narrative that echoes everywhere in Israel's canon of faith. It reverberates because Israel is marked by candor and will not lie to itself or its neighbors about its life. Israel will not, moreover, pretend to its God, about its God, or on behalf of its God.¹⁶ But this narrative also resounds because this God is known in Israel to have a dimension of vulnerability not to be easily overcome by strident assertions of sovereignty. Imagine, God captured by the Philistines!

¹⁴ See Erhard Gerstenberger, “Der Klagende Mensch: Anmerkungen zu den Klagegedichten in Israel,” in *Probleme biblischer Theologie: Gerhard von Rad zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Hans Walter Wolff (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1971), 64-72.

¹⁵ Concerning the pastoral practice of loss and hope, see Kenneth R. Mitchell and Herbert Anderson, *All Our Losses, All Our Grievs: Resources for Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983).

¹⁶ For an example of such theological candor, see David R. Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusive God: A Theology of Protest* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).

IV.

This is an exercise in biblical theology in which I have tried to be text-specific and canonically alert. Of course, the force of this narrative—certainly for us who heed it as authoritative but perhaps well beyond our confessional privilege—moves outside the book into the world. It insists that loss is real and deep, and it exhibits the conviction that *loss voiced* is essential to survival.¹⁷ It insists on that always, a point belatedly received by the Jewish sensibility of Sigmund Freud, who understood about voiced loss.¹⁸

If we are to do biblical theology that matters, the book in its peculiar, distinctive, exacting cadences spills into the world. It is the work and privilege of those who trust this book to be able to line out the saving truth of this text without excessive effort at relevance, without overwrought efforts to connect to contemporaneity, because when the text is faithfully and freely available, it enables connections that need not be forced or imposed.

Beyond the scope of Israel's own text, I have, of course, been speaking of Friday and have been outlining a "theology of the cross."¹⁹ Friday is that day of the departure of glory and exile and absence, the day of breaking old certitudes and shattering old ways of control and privilege. Friday is the day of absence and abandonment out of which we Christians regularly say "and him crucified." It is not easy to linger the right amount of time on Friday, just as our narrative probably did not know how many verses to have in Chapter 4 or how many times to reiterate "the ark of God is captured." The narrator decided on five such utterances.

Some in our tradition linger on Friday too long and what we get is an endlessly suffering Jesus. But it is possible, as well, in a "can-do" church subservient to a "can-do" society, that Friday is too awkward; as a consequence we quickly feature empty crosses, rush to Sunday, and reduce the

¹⁷ It is for good reason that Tod Linafelt's *Surviving Lamentations* links survival to the act of voiced loss. Without the voicing, the loss will devour. See, more generally, Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) and Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

¹⁸ The capacity of voicing to transform grief is an elemental insight and gift of the Jewish tradition so well grasped by Freud, even if this undoubted reality lacks any "reasonable" explanation. Without this crucial insight into speech as transformative action, we may have been left with only the reasonable "thought" of the more dominant Greek tradition. On the high cost for culture in repressing such voicing of loss and the antidote of speech as concerns cultural possibility, see John Murray Cuddihy, *The Ordeal of Civility: Freud, Marx, Levi-Strauss, and the Jewish Struggle with Modernity* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).

¹⁹ For a contemporary articulation of the theme, see Douglas John Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness: Toward an Indigenous Theology of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976).

truth of this God to an Easter parade.²⁰ We hurry to get it said liturgically on Saturday night, eagerly not waiting, but letting Friday pass almost unnoticed.

The Israelites did not have the complexity of the Trinity to let the Son die while the Father presides, even though Jürgen Moltmann has famously said that on Friday "the Fatherlessness of the Son is matched by the Sonlessness of the Father."²¹ In the early Friday cadences of the Ark Narrative, it is all of YHWH captured, all of the glory exiled, nothing in reserve, nothing held back, evidencing a God who is marked in all coming days by loss, marked in ways that persist.

Beyond the scope of Israel's own text, there looms the *Shoah* that admits of no "explanation," surely an unintelligible break marked by absence, a sacrament of barbarism over our century. We debate whether the holocaust is unique or not and offer what we can of human moralism or reason;²² or, with Richard Rubenstein, we give up on a God who could not be more reliable;²³ or, with David Blumenthal, we notice the abusiveness enacted in the ovens, seemingly by God.²⁴ But none of this finally satisfies. We are left with the raw event, much like Friday, only more massive and, in some ways, more contemporary, evidence at Auschwitz and Dachau echoed in a thousand other brutalities. The world is, on occasion, without God; perhaps God is unwilling to be present with the dying, perhaps God unable to stand the stress and so departing, perhaps God shoved aside because the perpetrators could not bear to act in God's presence. In any case, this is loss clear to the bottom, loss without redeeming quality, loss without life-giving spirit, loss without ordering creator, the world on its own, shriveling to brutality, a brutality immediate, but leaving its wake seemingly forever, because brutality seems never to end.

Beyond the scope of Israel's own text, it takes not much imagination to consider that the glory has departed, leaving the world no longer the way it used to be. Francis Fukuyama notwithstanding, we are witnessing the unraveling of the human world as it was, the old sureties of power and the reservoirs of heritage and learning, the reliable empires and the trusted

²⁰ The pressure and temptation to "cheat" on this Friday truth is evidenced in the practice of a local church during Holy Week in the Christian calendar. During the service of Tenebrae, one light was left on, thus compromising the liturgical enactment of all of the darkness of Friday, a compromise that undermined the entire enterprise.

²¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1974), 243.

²² See the analysis and argument of Steven Katz, *The Holocaust in Historical Context: Ancient and Medieval Cases* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

²³ Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism*, 2d ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

²⁴ Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusive God*.

certitudes.²⁵ There are, of course, powerful yearnings in society, in empire, and in church to recover the old coherence, to go back to what was. Even voicing that yearning for a lost coherence, a voicing quite common among Presbyterians, is a fearful acknowledgment of loss. In the very voicing we are scarcely able to fend off the costs that are so immediate and the fears that are so palpable, the need for more security, even while anxiety seems always to trump security: new security, newer anxiety. And God—the God of fidelity and sovereignty—is captured, exiled, absent, powerless. The absence is partly explained by guilt—ample guilt—deep patterns of exploitation, oppression, and slavery. Those admissions, however, do not suffice in the end, and so there is grief for a glory that has departed.

Beyond the scope of Israel's text, the void comes closer. It comes close in public arenas for which Littleton, CO may stand as epitome. For all our pushing, shoving, blaming, suing, and wondering, Littleton should not have happened, not raw violence committed against beloved children in privileged, secure suburbia. There was a failure of community fabric, an inattentiveness in family, a kind of crazy youth culture, needs for more generous public policy, for better gun control, for more vigilant police, or something. The glory has departed from that place and many other places like it. There are, of course, efforts to recover and restore, but the scar of absence will persist.

What has struck me, at a distance but inescapably aware of such loss, is that the grief is mumbled. Perhaps grief must always be mumbled. I was not there and so do not criticize. But the grieving is reported as intimate and sometimes romantic, without letting it touch God, without searing acknowledgment of Holy Absence, without recognition that the void has touched deeper than this community or its children, into the powerlessness of God, this God perhaps captured by the alien powers of commodity, not a poor reverberation of the cipher, "Philistine."

Beyond the scope of Israel's text, most of us do not have occasion, happily do not have occasion, for holocaust, for "the failure of the west," or even for Littleton. The life of the church—and the work of the pastor—is saturated, nonetheless, with loss. When the immediacy of loss hits, it is as stubborn as "the failure of the west," as immediately unbearable as the *Shoah*, as dread-filled as Littleton, even if not as massive and visible. You know the list: Gene's nonsmoker's lung cancer, Barbara's malignancy, little Michael, Tim's forced departure from the parish, the vanished child, the paralyzed athlete, the lost

²⁵ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992). Fukuyama makes very curious reading when done in the context of Holocaust reportage.

job. It comes, as the pastor knows, as the “null point,” the zero hour, the shutdown.²⁶ The pastor is called. The pastor is called because the pastor is “the Friday person” even in a secularized community, the one with the text and its candid cadences of loss that go clear to the bottom. It needs to be said and acknowledged, too many times, “The glory has departed.” Such a truth that needs to be voiced, moreover, could not be made up on the spot. It is too heavy and too dangerous, too much beyond our management to be made up on the spot. That loss is to be lined out, rather, from mothers and fathers who have always known that truth since that Friday in Ashdod, when the truth was lined out five unflinching times. It is a lining out that nobody wants to hear, and nobody wants to say. Except that the integrity of faith and the candor of lived life, not to say the integrity of the book, require it to be said: “The ark of God has been captured.” Five times. “The glory has departed.”

V.

This is an exercise in biblical theology. But the doing of biblical theology must be, characteristically, an exercise in social criticism. It must be so, because Israel always understood that the God it named and trusted was set deep in the fabric of daily life and not elsewhere. The truth needs to be said about *exiled glory* in order to live where God has placed us. Short of an affirmation of glory exiled, we too easily practice a “theology of glory” that uncritically celebrates too much. We do not put it as “theology of glory,” of course, since we are not so intimate with Luther’s phrasing. We do better to call it *denial*, the pretense that the absence does not reach to the bottom, that the point to which we come is not quite “null.”

It strikes us that the Ark Narrative tells the truth about YHWH. It refuses to explain everything in terms of guilt, because the loss has broken well beyond any thinkable guilt. Nor does it pretend that YHWH has prevailed against the Philistines. Indeed, if YHWH had wanted to prevail anywhere, it was surely against the Philistines. Against such a primal yen on YHWH’s part to prevail over the Philistines, the narrative acknowledges YHWH’s vulnerability in the face of Dagon’s superior power. The narrative does not flinch from facing the truth about glory exiled, an exile YHWH could not resist, an

²⁶ I take the phrase “null point” from Walther Zimmerli, “Plans for Rebuilding After the Catastrophe of 587,” *I Am Yahweh* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 111, 115, 133. See, derivatively, Walter Brueggemann, “Faith at the Nullpunkt,” in *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology*, ed. John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker (Harrisburg: Trinity, 2000), 143–54.

exile of YHWH that foreshadows the deep inheritance of exile that will mark the people of YHWH.²⁷

This is an exceedingly difficult theological claim. It is equally a difficult socioeconomic, political, and psychological claim. It is such a difficult claim that we devise ways to avoid it.²⁸ Against such devising, I propose that, in the doing of biblical theology in our time and place so bent on denial, the telling of truth about absence is not only difficult but so urgent. It is urgent because a society ordered by denial is a society that cannot be richly human. A society ordered by denial is likely committed to violence, for what it cannot have genuinely and gracefully, it will have by force. It assumes that no violence will drive away the glory that is permanently present; such a supposedly guaranteed glory invites shamelessness.²⁹ A society ordered by denial is likely committed to greed, for it seeks to fill the void of candor by unembarrassed acquisitiveness, always at the expense of the neighbor who is scarcely noticed. A society ordered by denial is likely committed to killing moralism, because one way to fend off anxiety is to expel, silence, and imprison the dissenters. Denial requires the exclusion of the other.

Israel itself engaged, here and there, in denial. In doing so, Israel predictably became infested with violence, greed, and killing moralism. These fruits of denial, in disobedient Israel or in the contemporary world, do not let us be human, do not make us safe, do not bring joy. In that community of covenant, the fruits of denial did not let Israel be fully Israel. As our narrative testifies, it is the odd vocation of this texted community, in such a matrix of denial that is wide and deep, to be truth-telling, all the way down. Many of us lack courage for such truth-telling; but we take heart and substance from this ancient account of our mothers and fathers who managed to get it said five times in this text: "The ark of God has been captured."

²⁷ As concerns the ongoing reality of exile in Jewish tradition and experience, see the eloquent and inescapable articulation of Andre Neher, *The Exile of the Word: From the Silence of the Bible to the Silence of Auschwitz* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981).

²⁸ There are, of course, countless ways to avoid. See Walter Brueggemann, "Texts That Linger, Not Yet Overcome," in *Shall Not the Judge of All the Earth Do What Is Right? Studies on the Nature of God in Tribute to James L. Crenshaw*, ed. David Penchansky and Paul L. Redditt (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 21-41.

²⁹ On the loss of shame, see Abraham Heschel, *Who is Man?* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965), 112-9.

Naming God She: The Theological Implications

by ELIZABETH A. JOHNSON

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I. INTRODUCTION

DURING THE LAST DECADES of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the new sound of women's voices has been heard in the field of theology. Active in ministry, theologically trained, different in racial and cultural identity, deeply committed, women are making contributions that not only challenge any idea that would subordinate them but also surprisingly enrich the understanding and practice of faith. One of the major areas where women have labored is the absolutely central issue of the image and concept of the divine, the One who is source, sustaining and saving power, and goal of the world, whom people call God.

The importance of this work can hardly be overestimated, for the symbol God is the central organizing idea of the whole religious system. The way a faith community speaks about its God indicates what it considers the greatest good, the profoundest truth, the most appealing beauty. In turn, the image of God shapes a community's corporate identity and behavior as well as the individual behavior of its members. A religion, for example, that speaks about God as a warrior and extols the way he smashes his enemies to bloody bits would promote aggressive group behavior among its adherents. On the other hand, a religion that preaches a God who lovingly forgives offenses would turn believers toward care for their neighbor and mutual peacemaking.¹ The symbol of God functions. It is never neutral in its effects but expresses and molds a community's bedrock convictions and actions.

Women's scholarship on this subject has made it piercingly clear that naming God almost exclusively in the image and likeness of a powerful ruling man has had the effect of legitimizing male authority in social and political structures. In the name of the male Lord, King, Father God who rules over all, men have the duty to command and control: on earth as it is in heaven. In Mary Daly's succinct, inimitable phrase: if God is male, then the male is

¹ These examples are adduced by Gordon D. Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 187-9.

God.² In addition, exclusively male images of God have also robbed women of the spiritual power they would have if the ultimately loving and powerful God were addressed in their womanly image and likeness. It is no accident that, in male-dominated religions and the societies they influence, women and their concerns have consistently been marginalized.

By challenging the bedrock assumption of this arrangement, naming God in female terms promotes change or, in religious terms, conversion of a community's mind and heart to the true equality of women. As long as these symbols do not just point to some subordinated aspect of the divine but represent the abundance of the living God in creating, redeeming, and calling the world to eschatological peace, they operate with prophetic power to promote more just, egalitarian relationships among believing people. As the history of religions makes clear, God-language alone cannot bring about this transformation; female deities and the subordination of women have and still do coexist. But in the context of the social movement for women's equality and human dignity, which now reaches global proportions, speech about God has a unique potential for affecting change at a deep and lasting level. If God is "she" as well as "he," a new possibility can be envisioned of a way of living together that honors difference but allows women and men to share life in equal measure. In this lecture I illustrate how far we have come on this issue and assess more deeply some theological implications of naming God in the image of women.³

II. CONCRETE EXAMPLES

Let us begin with concrete examples, the fruit of women's pastoral creativity and theological scholarship. I frame each example as a question in order to invite thought about what such naming means.

What is going on when women biblical scholars today point out that the root of the Hebrew word for God's mercy, *rahm*, also means a woman's uterus, so that when scripture calls upon God for mercy, it is actually asking God to forgive with the kind of love a mother has for the child of her womb? In the words of Isaiah: "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the child of her womb? Yet even if these may forget, I will not forget you" (Isa 49:15). In Phyllis Trible's memorable phrase, we witness here the journey of a metaphor from the wombs of women to the mercy of

² Mary Daly, "Feminist Post-Christian Introduction," *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 38 and her sustained analysis in *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973).

³ For full development of this thesis, see Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

God.⁴ What happens when we make this an explicit part of our understanding of divine mercy rather than leave it tucked away in the text?

What is going on when women draw attention to long-neglected biblical texts about Holy Wisdom, *Sophia* in Greek, a female figure of power and might? Not only does she mother the world into birth, but, being all powerful, she also saves the world and makes people holy. In a retelling of Israel's history in the book of Wisdom, "she" leads the people out from slavery in Egypt, bringing them across the waters of the sea and leading them through the wilderness with fire and cloud (Wis 10:15-19). The biblical book of Proverbs opens with her crying out at the city gates, excoriating those who will not listen to her words of instruction, but promising that "whoever finds me finds life" (Prov 8:35)—words adapted to signal the saving significance of Jesus in John's Gospel (John 10:10). Most tellingly, evil does not prevail against her (Wis 7:30). Far from being a mere aspect of the divine, in all her fullness "Divine Sophia is Israel's God in the language and *gestalt* of the goddess," as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has argued.⁵

What is going on when women New Testament scholars today remind us that, in Luke's Gospel, right after Jesus tells the parable of the Good Shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep to look for the one that got lost, he goes on to preach a parable with a female protagonist, a woman searching for her lost silver coin? Both parables depict the work of God the Redeemer, one in the imagery of male work, one in that of female work.⁶ But for all the churches and statues of the Good Shepherd, where are the churches dedicated to God the Good Homemaker? Where are the sermons that start, like Augustine did, "Holy Divinity has lost her money, and it is us!"? Why has this seeker of money that is very important to her not become a familiar image of the divine?

What is going on when women scholars of medieval religious history shed light on women mystics and their articulation of their experience of God in female metaphors? To cite but Julian of Norwich and her daring view of God's courtesy:

As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother... I understand three ways of contemplating motherhood in God. The first is the foundation of our nature's creation; the second is Christ's taking

⁴ Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 31-59.

⁵ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 133; for overview of Sophia scholarship and its significance for christology and pneumatology, see Johnson, *She Who Is*, 86-100.

⁶ Turid Karlsen Seim, "The Gospel of Luke," in *Searching the Scriptures*, vol. 2: *A Feminist Commentary*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 729-31.

of our nature, where the motherhood of grace begins; the third is the motherhood at work in the Spirit. And by the same grace, everything is penetrated, in length and in breadth, in height and in depth without end; and it is all one love.⁷

Why are we so forgetful of this blessed motherhood? What would result if the church began to use this language equivalently with that of divine fatherhood?

What is going on when, in the tradition of Wisdom and Julian, Linda Reichenbecher, a young woman studying for ministry at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in 1993, composes this meditation:

I stared at my doctor who had treated my burns, and in her eyes saw intelligence and care, and knew that I had looked upon the face of God.

I stared at the soft, worn hands of my grandmother, and in them saw the thousands of potatoes peeled to nourish her family, and knew that I had looked upon the face of God. . . .

I stared at my small child's excited face at the beach, and in her saw new wonder at the world, and knew that I had looked upon the face of God.

I stared at the mother robin angrily diving at me as I came too close, and in her I saw fierce protection, and knew that I had looked upon the face of God.

I stared at the darkness of the night, and in it saw the constant companionship of my faith, and knew that I had looked upon the face of God.

What is going today on when two Jewish women, Naomi Janowitz and Maggie Wenig, compose a Sabbath prayer for their community that prays:

Blessed is She who spoke and the world became. Blessed is She.

Blessed is She who in the beginning, gave birth.

Blessed is She who says and performs.

Blessed is She who declares and fulfills. . . .

Blessed is She who lives forever, and exists eternally.

Blessed is She who redeems and saves. Blessed is Her Name.⁸

⁷ Julian of Norwich, *Showings* (New York: Paulist, 1978), 296–7; see Joan Nuth, *Wisdom's Daughter: The Theology of Julian of Norwich* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

⁸ Naomi Janowitz and Maggie Wenig, "Sabbath Prayer," in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 176.

What would be the spiritual and political results if every Sabbath saw religious communities of Jews and Christians praising Her Name?

Finally, what is going on when Mary Kathleen Schmitt, an Episcopal priest, works for years with her whole parish to create inclusive-language prayers for Sunday liturgy in a three-year cycle? One prayer for Christmas Day addresses God this way:

Maker of this earth our home,
 You sweep the heavens with your starry skirt of night
 and polish the eastern sky to bring light to the new day.
 Come to us in the birth of the infant Christ,
 that we may discover the fullness of your redemption throughout the
 universe;
 O Mother and Child of Peace bound by the Spirit of Love,
 One-in-Three forever. Amen.⁹

What is going on in these and a multitude of other examples, I suggest, is that, coming to self-awareness in community with other women, women are embarking on a profound, historic, spiritual adventure. Owning the belief that we are truly created in the image and likeness of God, we are seeking sources that bless rather than demean the reality of being female. Conscious of the harm done by sexism and attentive to our own experiences of suffering, power, and agency, we are engaged in creative naming toward God from the matrix of our own experience: God as source, wellspring, and fountain of life, mother and womb of life, Shekinah and Sophia, lover, friend, angry prophet, and indwelling spirit—these metaphors are not just political correctives to patriarchal modes of believing, though they are that. Just as significantly, they allow the church to discover the sacred in places where tradition had long stopped looking to find it—namely, in what is associated with women.

My thesis is that this new naming from the reality of women to the deep mystery of God has implications on two fronts: the truth about God on one hand, and the well-being of women as fully equal to men in human and religious dignity on the other hand. Let us explore these ramifications at greater length.

III. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TRUTH OF GOD

Taking the full measure of these implications cannot be done apart from recalling the three “ground rules” that govern all speech about God. The first

⁹ Mary Kathleen Speegle Schmitt, *Seasons of the Feminine Divine: Christian Feminist Prayers for the Liturgical Cycle* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 1:52; notice that in this prayer Mother refers to God, not to Mary the mother of Jesus.

and most basic is this: the reality of God is a mystery beyond all imagining, literally incomprehensible. We can never wrap our minds completely around God and capture divinity in the net of our concepts. The history of theology is replete with this truth: recall Augustine's insight that if we have understood, then what we have understood is not God; Anselm's argument that God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived; Hildegard's vision of God's glory as Living Light that blinded her sight; Aquinas's working rule that we can know that God is and what God is not, but not what God is; Luther's stress on the hiddenness of God's glory in the suffering of the cross; Simone Weil's conviction that there is nothing that resembles what she can conceive of when she says the word God; Karl Rahner's image that we are a little island surrounded by a deep ocean; and Sallie McFague's insistence that, since all language about God is technically improper, we speak basically in models and parables.¹⁰ It is a matter of the livingness of God.

Consequently, there is a second ground rule: no expression for God can be taken literally. Whether explained by a theory of analogy, metaphor, or symbol, all human words about the divine proceed by way of indirection. We are always naming *toward* God, not defining God. To cite Sallie McFague's way of putting it, our words and images are like a finger pointing at the moon, not the moon itself. They set off from fragments of goodness and beauty of this world and simply turn our face toward the source and goal of it all.

Looking ahead in our argument, we can see that the understanding that all speech about God is indirect assumes a strongly critical function when the androcentric character of traditional God-talk is faced. Now it becomes clear that the critically negative function of analogy, metaphor, and symbol must be stringently applied to male images and concepts of God no less than to other aspects of divine predication if masculine literalism is to be avoided. The designation "he" and the name "Father" are subject to all the limitations found in any words referring to God, and, in the end, do not really tell us anything essential about the divine. Only arrogance assumes that we can preside over the reality of God in our concepts.

¹⁰ Augustine, *Sermo* 52, c. 6, n. 16 (*Patrologia latina* 38:360); Anselm, *Proslogium*, in *Saint Anselm: Basic Writings* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1974), Chapters 2-3; Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias* (New York: Paulist, 1990), Book 1, Vision 1. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 3, preface; Martin Luther, "The Heidelberg Disputation," Thesis 19 and 20, in *Luther: Early Theological Works* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 290-1; Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 32; Karl Rahner, "The Specific Character of the Christian Concept of God," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 21 (New York: Crossroad, 1989); Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 35 and *passim*.

From this, the third ground rule arises, namely, that there must be many names for God. If human beings were capable of expressing the fullness of God in one straight-as-an-arrow name, the proliferation of names, images, and concepts observable throughout religious history would make no sense. But since no one alone is absolute or adequate, a positive revelry, a symphony, of symbols for the divine is needed to nourish the mind and spirit. Examples abound.

In the Bible, as Paul Ricoeur has lucidly shown, there is a polyphony of forms of discourse, all of them radically nonmetaphysical, by means of which the community interprets its religious experience. Each of these forms of discourse—narrative, prophecy, command, wisdom writings, and hymns of celebration and lament—reflects different aspects of relationship to holy mystery. “The referent ‘God’ is thus intended by the convergence of all these partial discourses”; yet God is still a reality that eludes them all.¹¹ In the matrix of these discourses an abundance of images comes into play. In addition to terms taken from personal relationships such as father, mother, husband, female beloved, companion, and friend, and images taken from political life such as advocate, liberator, king, warrior, and judge, the Bible pictures God on the model of a wide array of human crafts and professions: dairymaid, shepherd, farmer, laundress, construction worker, potter, fisherman, midwife, merchant, physician, bakerwoman, teacher, writer, artist, nurse, metalworker, and homemaker. Despite the predominance of imagery taken from the experience of men, feminist exegesis brings to light the evocative vision of God as a female figure of power and might in the Sophia texts, as well as the more domestic images of God as a woman giving birth, nursing her young, and dedicated to child care for the little ones. Scripture also draws from the animal kingdom, depicting God as roaring lion, hovering mother bird, angry mother bear, and protective mother hen, and from natural reality such as light, cloud, rock, fire, refreshing water, and life itself.

Postbiblical Jewish usage continued to be fertile ground for the many names of God, as can be seen in the over ninety names used in the Mishnah.¹² Among them, in addition to the most popular terms Creator and Father (of mercy, of the whole world, in heaven), are the Living God, Friend of the World, Mighty One, Searcher of Hearts, the One who knows the thoughts

¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, “Naming God,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 34 (1978–1979): 222.

¹² A. Marmorstein, *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God* (along with *The Doctrine of Merits in Old Rabbinic Literature*) (New York: KTAV, 1968), 17–147; the original publication date was 1927. A similar listing of Christian names of God during the same period is compiled by Hans-Werner Bartsch, “L’emploi du nom de Dieu dans le Christianisme primitif,” in *L’analyse du langage théologique: le nom de Dieu*, ed. Enrico Castelli (Paris: Aubier, 1969), 185–200.

of all, Lord of Consolations, Height of the World, Eye of the World, Life of the World, Beloved, the One who dwells in hidden places, the Heart of Israel, the One who understands, the One who spoke and the world was, Justice of the World, Home of the World, Rock of the World, the Holy One, Holy Spirit, the One who hears, Peace of the World, Strong One, and Merciful One.

The Islamic litany of praise of Allah illustrates yet another tradition of God's many names. There are one hundred names in all: Praised be Allah the Almighty, the Compassionate, the Holy, the Peaceful, the Shelterer of the orphan, and so on; but only ninety-nine names are actually said. The last one is honored in silence—and it is the truest of all. As folklore would have it, only the camel knows.¹³

Taking all the names together will not deliver a complete understanding of God. To borrow a metaphor from Henri de Lubac, persons who seek to know God by compiling the names of God do not resemble misers amassing a heap of gold that can go on increasing until a rare purchase can be made. Rather, such persons are better compared to swimmers who can only keep afloat by moving, by cleaving a new wave at each stroke. They are forever brushing aside the representations that are continually reforming, knowing full well that these support them, but that if they were to rest for a single moment they would sink.¹⁴ "If you have understood, then what you have understood is not God."¹⁵

These three ground rules of the incomprehensibility of God, the indirect, nonliteral nature of religious language, and the necessity of many names for God are affirmed throughout Jewish, Christian, and Islamic tradition, and about them there is little dispute. Our situation, however, is quite different from what one would expect if these ground rules had been followed. For we inherit a God-language that is cast almost exclusively in male imagery. Wealthy, powerful men of the upper class and privileged race serve as the chief model for the divine, as can be heard in the most common divine names: King, Lord, and Father.¹⁶ God sits upon his throne like a monarch with hosts of couriers to do his bidding; he gives laws that must be obeyed; like a patriarchal head of household he governs his domain, being worthy of

¹³ E. von Ivanka, "Le problème des 'noms de Dieu' et de l'ineffabilité divine selon le pseudo-Denys l'aréopagite," in *L'analyse du langage théologique: le nom de Dieu*, ed. Enrico Castelli (Paris: Aubier, 1969), 201–5.

¹⁴ Henri de Lubac, *Discovery of God* (New York: P. J. Kenedy, 1960), 120–1.

¹⁵ Augustine, *Sermo* 52, c. 6, n.16.

¹⁶ For an analysis laced with humor and irony, see Brian Wren, *What Language Shall I Borrow? God-Talk in Worship: A Male Response to Feminist Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 115–22.

respectful love. One of the clearest examples is Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling painting of God the Creator, in which an old, white-bearded, muscular man creates a younger man in his own image. This art reflects those who are at the pinnacle of the society that creates it: older, white males. Such have had the power of naming in the church. Why could God not be spoken about with qualities of someone who is young, black, female, or all three in combination? But the image of the older white man is tenacious. As Celie says in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*: "Can't git that white man off my eyeballs."¹⁷

Using male images of God to the exclusion of female and cosmic ones almost inevitably makes God-talk become rigid and indeed literal. The result in theological terms is nothing short of an idol, a graven image. Indeed, the conflicts that break out over female naming indicate that, however subliminally, maleness *is* intended when we say God. Consequently, the absolute mystery of the infinitely loving God is reduced to the fantasy of an infinitely ruling man.

Prophets and religious thinkers have long insisted on the need to break down false idols and escape out of their embrace toward the living God. More solid than stone, more resistant to iconoclasm than bronze, seems to be the ruling male substratum of the idea of God cast in theological language and engraved in public and private prayer. In this context, naming God *she* has profound theological significance for understanding the truth of God. Simply stated, it smashes the idol. By relativizing masculine imagery it breaks the stranglehold of patriarchal discourse and its deleterious effects. God is not literally a father, a king, or a lord but something ever so much more. Thus is the truth of God more greatly honored. This is not to say that the reality of male experience cannot be used to name God. Men too are decent creatures, made in the image of God, sinful yet redeemed, and metaphors taken from their experience may be used. But seeking the female face of God releases divine mystery from its age-old patriarchal cage so that God can be truly God. This is an act critical for the integrity of theology. Seeking the female face of God functions to set free the truth of the living God.

That is not all. Given the destructive power of evil in the world, both the mystery of God's truth and human flourishing are terrifyingly at risk in history. The truth about God is twisted to justify human oppression, and companion creatures are demeaned in the name of a distorted view of divine will. "By deforming God we protect our own egotism," Juan Luis Segundo contends with startling insight. "Our falsified and inauthentic ways of dealing

¹⁷ Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992).

with our fellow human beings are allied to our falsification of the idea of God. Our unjust society and our perverted idea of God are in close and terrible alliance."¹⁸ The logic of that alliance leads to the realization that, in addition to liberating the truth of God, naming God with female metaphors is also powerfully liberating for women created in her image and likeness.

IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DIGNITY AND EQUALITY OF WOMEN

An ambiguity about women's true humanity bedevils the Jewish and Christian traditions. On one hand, we are said to be created in the image of God and, for Christians, redeemed by Christ, sanctified by the Holy Spirit, and destined for eternal joy in heaven. On the other hand, precisely because of women's embodiment, theology has diminished the strength of each of these markers of religious identity, seeing women as created in the image of God only when taken together with man who is her head (Augustine), or as a defective, misbegotten male (Aquinas), or even as a dangerous temptress to men's virtue (Tertullian).¹⁹ Behind all of these traditional, distorted but highly influential, male definitions of women is the classical philosophical system of dualism, which separates reality into spirit and matter, identifying men with spirit (i.e., light, soul, reason, act—what is eternal and divine) while identifying women with matter (i.e., darkness, body, emotions, passivity—what is changeable, uncontrollable, and passing away toward death). By this logic women exist with an inferiority for which there is no remedy. By nature they must be subordinate to men here on earth, though heaven may bring equality in grace and glory.

As with any system of oppression, once this gets put in place structurally it begins to be taken for granted. Over time, women internalize the image that the oppressive system feeds them, and they instinctively think of themselves as less than worthy. As a powerful element in this system, the exclusively male image of God promotes this "mood," and consequently it reinforces, even legitimizes, patriarchal social structures in family, society, and church. Language about the father in heaven who rules over the world justifies and even necessitates an order whereby the male religious leader rules over his flock, the civil ruler has domination over his subjects, and the husband exercises headship over his wife. Men rule thanks to their greater similarity to the source of all being and power.

¹⁸ Juan Luis Segundo, *Our Idea of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1974), 8.

¹⁹ See Margaret Farley, "Sources of Sexual Inequality in the History of Christian Thought," *Journal of Religion* 56 (1976): 162-76.

This state of affairs has a profound impact on women's religious identity. It does not point to the equal participation of women and men in the divine ground. Rather, women can participate in likeness to God only by abstracting themselves from their concrete, bodily reality. This sets up a largely unconscious dynamic that alienates women from their own goodness and power at the same time that it reinforces dependency upon men and male authority.

As the women's movement has developed in the religions, something akin to a spiritual uprising is taking place. Women are experiencing themselves as beloved of God. We are being converted from trivializing ourselves to honoring ourselves as genuinely equal images of God and Christ and to naming toward God in that light. The artist says it best. In a dramatic play about the metaphysical dilemma of being black, being female, and being alive, Ntozake Shange captures in one line the dynamism of new experience of women's selves in tandem with new language about God. After roiling adventures of prejudice, hurt, and survival, a tall black woman rises from despair to cry out, "i found god in myself and i loved her, i loved her fiercely."²⁰ It is this finding and fierce loving of the female self in relation to God and God in relation to self that is a major root of women's taking back the power of naming toward God out of their own reality. In turn, female images of God function to affirm the excellence of being women sexually, psychologically, intellectually, politically, socially, and religiously.

This has ramifications for women's well-being all over the world. As United Nations figures report, women, who form one-half of the world's population, do two-thirds of the world's work, receive one-tenth of the world's salary, own one-hundredth of the world's land, constitute two-thirds of illiterate adults, and, together with their starving children, are three-fourths of the world's starving people.²¹ To make a dark picture even bleaker, women are bodily and sexually exploited, physically abused, raped, battered, and murdered by men to a degree that is not mutual.²² Sexism is rampant on a global scale, nor does it exist in a vacuum. Factoring in racism, classism,

²⁰ Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (New York: Macmillan, 1976), 63. In this cry not only femaleness but blackness is endorsed as essential to this character's self-discovery; see the analysis by Michelle Cliff, "I Found God in Myself and I Loved Her / I Loved Her Fiercely: More Thoughts on the Work of Black Women Artists," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2 (1986): 7-39.

²¹ "World's Women Data Sheet" (Washington: Population Reference Bureau in collaboration with UNICEF, 1985) and *Report of the United Nations on the Status of Women* (New York: United Nations, 2000).

²² Carol Adams and Marie Fortune, eds., *Violence against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook* (New York: Continuum, 1995) and Mary John Mananzan, ed., *Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), especially Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's essay, "Ties that Bind: Domestic Violence against Women,"

heterosexism, ageism, colonialism, militarism, and supremacy over the earth, structures that interlock in diverse ways to shape women's lives, makes clear the complexity of oppressions against which women struggle for fullness of life.

Naming God *she* is not a panacea in and of itself, but it has powerful social, psychological, and spiritual effects. Reorienting the imagination at a basic level, this usage challenges the dominance of male power over women and facilitates the growth of the human dignity of women made in God's image. God as mother, lover, and friend of the world, which is her body; God as grandmother giving courage in *la lucha*; God as matrix of life; God as directing the economy of the whole household; God as indwelling *rûah*; God as saving Sophia; God as renewing and challenging female Spirit: in the name of this God, women and men are empowered to enter the struggle for social justice for all women and their girl children who are now seen to be of inestimable value.

It is important to flag a danger to this enterprise of seeking the female face of God. This danger arises with the use of the category of the "feminine." This category is usually employed by those who cast women as polar opposites from men. Technically described as an anthropology of complementarity, this view elevates sexual difference to such importance that it basically results in two different kinds of human nature, masculine and feminine. Masculine nature is rational, aggressive, and equipped for action in the public realm, while feminine nature, being emotional, gentle, and oriented to love and nurturing, is fit for the private domain of childbearing and care of the vulnerable. This way of thinking assigns preset characteristics to men and women on the basis of gender and then extrapolates to claim that differing social roles for men and women are necessary. Caught in this dualistic way of thinking that results in real differences in power, women have unequal say in shaping a community's cultural institutions, laws, and symbols.

A good example of the way this anthropology of complementarity functions can be found in the teaching of John Paul II, which is exemplary of many conservative theologians. In his encyclical on women, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, the pope clearly separates the two sexes in their essence, emphasizing that woman has a "special nature" characterized by the ability to total, accepting love.²³ Women have specifically feminine qualities, he writes; they are gentle, nonassertive, noncompetitive, receptive, tender, and compassion-

²³ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem (On the Dignity and Vocation of Women)*, *Origins* 18 (6 October 1988): 261-83; see also his "Letter to Women," *Origins* 25 (27 July 1995): 137-43.

ate. Women are givers of life and consecrated by nature to its service. Women are more sensitive to what is required for the flourishing of persons. Women show greater capacity for interpersonal relations. Women have a greater capacity for self-sacrifice. Men, on the other hand, are better suited to the world of ideas, structures, leadership, and administration.

There is real advance here from the classical tradition where women were vilified and denied the dignity of being persons truly created in the image of God. The pope emphatically affirms the equality of women and men in this regard. Nevertheless, because of his dualistic anthropology, he insists just as emphatically that there is an essential difference between women and men: that women's feminine nature, the archetype of which is the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, has a distinctive quality that orients them to their reproductive function and the works of love, and that this essential difference between feminine and masculine natures mandates different social roles, including that of the ordained priesthood. If women reject this, he warns, they risk becoming masculinized.

As any number of women scholars have commented, what results is a kind of romantic feminism: women are so ordered to the realm of love that they are too good to get involved in the messiness of the public realm. Many women respond as did one of my college students in a paper on this encyclical: "As a young woman of the late twentieth century, do I want to be so highly exalted? No, I would rather be equal." The point being, of course, that by boxing women's identity into a narrow range of so-called feminine qualities, even the wonderful capacity to love, this dualistic anthropology inevitably privileges men in terms of psychological and political power. It does not accurately reflect the attributes of the great, diverse range of real women in history. Ironically, it shortchanges men, who by definition cannot fulfill Christ's teaching to love God and neighbor as well as women can.

Rosemary Radford Ruether astutely asks the fundamental question that needs to be answered here: Is it not the case that the very concept of the "feminine" is a patriarchal invention?²⁴ Does it not express a sexist view of women, who are to develop certain characteristics pleasing to men? Does it not simply endorse the patriarchal status quo, created and projected onto women by men and vigorously defended because it functions so well to keep men in positions of public power and women in positions of service to them in the private realm?

²⁴ Rosemary Radford Ruether, "The Female Nature of God," in *God as Father*, ed. Johannes-Baptist Metz and Edward Schillebeeckx (New York: Seabury, 1981), 61-6.

African-American theologians, such as Shawn Copeland and Delores Williams, and Hispanic/Latina theologians, such as María Pilar Aquino and Ada María Isasi-Díaz, raise the additional criticism that the concept of the feminine is shaped by the privilege of race and class.²⁵ It is white, middle-class women who can enjoy the qualities of being feminine, for they have not known the struggle for survival engaged by generations of slaves or marginalized immigrants. In fact, it requires the existence of such "nonfeminine" women to do the sexual and domestic scut work of society, so middle-class women can have the luxury of being feminine according to the ideal.

Watch what happens when this sexist, racist, and classist ideal of the feminine is used in speech about God. Its presence is betrayed by the statement that God has feminine traits or aspects, or a feminine dimension or side. But being loving and compassionate is insufficient for governance of the world, and so these traits are complemented by the so-called masculine traits of reasonableness, power, justice-making, and headship, in order for God to be God. At the end of the day, God is still envisioned in the image of the ruling man, only now possessing a milder, sweeter side that offsets the harshness of the purely masculine mold. The feminine is thereby incorporated in a subordinate way into a symbol of the divine that remains predominantly patriarchal. What we do not enjoy is an icon of God in all divine fullness and strength in female form.

What is the practical effect of this in the human community? Men created in the image of this God benefit by developing feminine, nurturing qualities in themselves. However, women find no equivalent spur to develop in themselves the presumably masculine qualities of rationality, the ability to act and transform, authority, leadership, and transcendence. The symbol of God functions. Actual women are then seen as capable of representing only the feminine qualities of what is still the male-centered symbol of God, the fullness of which can only be represented by a man. In sum, actual women remain subordinate. Such an understanding of God is adequate neither to the truth of God nor to justice for women. It does not liberate.

In contrast to this sexist, racist, and classist notion of the feminine, there exists what may be described as an egalitarian anthropology of partnership. In this view of the human race, sexual difference is vitally important, but it does

²⁵ M. Shawn Copeland, "Toward a Critical Christian Feminist Theology of Solidarity," in *Women and Theology*, ed. Mary Ann Hinsdale and Phyllis Kaminski (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 3–38; Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993); María Pilar Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993); and Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996).

not become the sole, essential marker of a person's identity. Rather, one's gender combines with race, class, ethnic identity, cultural makeup, as well as historical, geographical, and social locations to define people as uniquely themselves. In this school of thought, diversity of personal characteristics and gifts is not predetermined by sex but ranges across a wide spectrum for women and men. In fact, the range of differences among women themselves ends up being just as great as that of differences between some women and some men. Social roles may be engaged in according to one's gift, education, and inclination, not gender.

In the context of this egalitarian anthropology that honors women in all our difference, speaking about God in female metaphor has a distinctly different effect. It allows women's reality to point toward divine mystery in as adequate and inadequate a way as male metaphors do. Women are capable *as women* of symbolizing the whole of the mystery of God, not merely an aspect or dimension. We reflect God not only as nurturing—although certainly that—but as powerful, taking initiative, creating-redeeming-saving, angry against injustice, and struggling with and victorious over the powers of this world. The full and still-developing historical reality of women is a source for female icons of the living God in all her fullness and strength. And women are blessed in the naming.

V. CONCLUSION

We have been pondering the dynamic process of how imaging God creates worlds. We have been exploring the claim that, if women are created in the image of God, then God can be spoken of in female metaphors in ways similar to traditional male metaphors, without talk of feminine dimensions reducing the impact of this imagery. This has profound implications for the truth about God, for women's equal human dignity, and thereby for the self-understanding and behavior of the church and wider society.

As in any passage through the wilderness, this journey toward more just and liberating images of God is not without its dangers. Some fear that Christians will lose their true heritage, which is intertwined with the name of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As a theologian I am concerned about this. My own conviction, committed as I am to the Christian faith, holds the trinitarian formula dear. But it is not a literal formula, nor was it ever intended to be the only way that Christians name God. As indicated in my opening examples, a number of sources support efforts to use female names: the witness of the scriptures with their multitude of images, the example of Jesus who spoke about God in many startling ways, and the writings of early Christian writers and later mystics who employed maternal and wisdom

references.²⁶ There is, too, the added experience of women today, empowered to seek the face of God in new ways reflecting their own God-given human dignity. So long as the female words or images can be connected with the patterns of acting and loving of the God of Israel, revealed in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Mother Jesus (as Julian calls Christ), or Jesus-Sophia (as I would have it), so long as they point us toward the God who creates and redeems the world and whose Spirit fills the whole earth, this danger can be satisfactorily countered.

Let us conclude by revisiting some of our opening images with this in mind. God cries out like a woman in childbirth to bring a new world of justice to birth. With signs and wonders, Holy Wisdom leads the people toward freedom; against her, evil does not prevail. A woman, imaging God the Redeemer, searches for her precious lost piece of silver. Creating, redeeming, and sanctifying are all the work of God our loving Mother. A female doctor with intelligent eyes heals burns. Other images from women's experience, past and present, also come to hand: Rosa Parks sits down in the front of the bus. The divine Shekinah, female spirit of God, feels the pain in her neck when a man is hanged and suffers the degradation and the violence when a woman is raped. God shines in the beauty of the waters and flowers in the fertility of the spring. A Zapatista woman shelters her babe from flying government bullets under the shadow of her wings, her outstretched arms. God smiles upon us with the eyes of a woman in love. God rages against those who harm the poor like a mother bear protecting her cubs—she tears their heart out from their chest (Hos 13:8).

The holy mystery of the living God transcends all images but can be spoken about equally well and poorly in concepts taken from male or female—and, indeed, cosmic—reality. Far from being silly or faddish, the approach women are pioneering goes forward with the conviction that only if God is named in this complete way, only if the full reality of historical women of all races and classes, as well as that of men, enters into our God symbol, only then can the idolatrous fixation on one image of God be broken, can women be empowered at our deepest core, and, consequently, can our religious and civic communities be transformed toward greater justice. In the midst of this struggle, every use of female images for God produces one more fragment of the truth of the mystery of God healing, redeeming, and liberating all human beings and the earth.

²⁶ In Mark's Gospel, Jesus refers to God as Father four times; in Luke, fifteen times; in Matthew, forty-nine times; and in John, 109 times. This would seem to reflect the growing practice of the Christian community through the first century, rather than the practice of Jesus himself.

Mixed Messages: Encountering *Mestizaje* in the Old Testament

by FRANCISCO GARCÍA-TRETO

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I. INTRODUCTION

AT THE RISK of sounding ungrateful—and I am not so in the least—for the fine meal with which ARAMARK has just regaled us, let me say that, in my fondest fantasy, tonight we would have had *ajiacó*. For those of you who do not share the blessed memory of sitting down to a steaming bowl of *ajiacó* and trying to figure out which bits had just cooled off enough to eat without scalding your mouth—"Eat from the edge of the plate first," I remember Grandfather Treto saying to me—let me quote Jorge J. E. Gracia, Samuel P. Capen Chair and Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at SUNY Buffalo—do I need to tell you that he is another Cuban?—who describes it as follows:

The *ajiacó* is a Cuban dish with roots in the Iberian *puchero*, but it is quite different to it in substantial ways. It is a kind of stew of many different vegetables and meats: corn, potatoes, squash, plantain (both ripe and green), a local variety of sweet potato, ñame, manioc, malanga, chicken, beef jerky, pork, and so on. All these ingredients are cooked together and produce an interesting mix with an idiosyncratic flavor, but the original ingredients remain discernible, even though the sauce they produce is distinctively new. One can still identify the corn, plantain, malanga, and so on, and not only identify them visually, but taste their particular flavors, although even then their immersion in the common sauce and cooking together with the other ingredients modifies their taste. There is no homogeneity in the *ajiacó*, although it is a mixture which could not exist without the diverse ingredients that compose it.¹

I hasten to add that Gracia's description is neither from a cookbook nor from a nostalgic memoir, but from his very recent and timely *Hispanic/Latino Identity: A Philosophical Perspective*, a book that I consider a major contribution to tonight's subject, and that the *ajiacó* image as a representation of Cuban ethnicity and culture is a legacy from Fernando Ortiz, the pioneer of Cuban anthropology.

¹ Jorge J. E. Gracia, *Hispanic/Latino Identity: A Philosophical Perspective* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 111-2.

That is why you will also find it in the works of Justo González and of Fernando Segovia, to name just two who may be more familiar to you. I will have more to say about the *ajiaco* metaphor later in the lecture, but at this point let me just use it to warn you that this lecture itself is something of an *ajiaco*.

It became clear to me, as tonight approached, and as more people on campus asked me if I was going to define *mestizaje*, that a simple definition of the term, such as that which anyone with access to a good Spanish/English dictionary could get without any great difficulty, just would not do. *Mestizaje* is too central a concept in the current biblical and theological work of the U.S. Latino/Hispanic community to give it short shrift or, worse, to leave this audience unaware of its relevance. Virgilio Elizondo's *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise*, without a doubt the work that made *mestizaje* the *locus theologicus* it is, first appeared in 1983, as a reworking of his 1978 Paris dissertation, "Metissage, violence culturelle, annonce de l'Évangile." I wonder whether the reason for the radical change in the title was due to an Orbis editor's concern over the ability among the general public of the United States to recognize our term. *Galilean Journey* reappeared this year in a newly revised and expanded edition. In the epilogue in which he surveys the events of the last twenty years resulting from the publication of his book, Elizondo puts *mestizaje* first in his list of "new categories" that the book brought to "the field of critical theology."² Also, in the field of biblical hermeneutics, when Justo González's *Santa Biblia: The Bible through Hispanic Eyes* appeared in 1996, it designated *mestizaje* as one of the five major paradigms important for the way in which many Hispanics are reading the Bible. González actually uses "Mestizaje and Mulatez" as the title of the third chapter of his book, crediting Elizondo with "most significant work with this understanding of our reality."³

What I want to do has at least two components. First, I propose to explore *mestizaje* a bit more carefully, partly at least in order to set out expansions and connections of the concept that I find useful in constructing a paradigm for reading the Bible "in Spanish," that is, for the construction of a Hispanic/Latino hermeneutics. Second, I briefly suggest an application of the *mestizaje* paradigm to Ruth. In his "Mestizaje and Mulatez" chapter González reviews some previous interpretive work of mine on another part of the Old Testament, connected to the topic, and I must confess that I was tempted to serve you warmed leftovers, but resisted. At least my attempt to think as a *mestizo* and serve up a *mestizo* reading of Ruth will be fresh and newly cooked for this

² Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 133.

³ (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 78.

occasion. But let's stop eating from the edge and dig in. I hope the *ajiacó* is well-cooked, and not too hot.

II. MESTIZAJE

Let me begin with the obvious fact that neither Virgilio Elizondo nor Justo González coined the term *mestizaje*. The word has been in Spanish usage ever since the reality to which it originally points: when the mixture of races—most specifically in the offspring of Spanish men and women of the American peoples, for whom the misnomer “Indians” (*Indios*) was to become the standard term—began to appear. The first American *mestizos* were born shortly after the arrival of the conquistadors. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, in his inimitable memoir of the conquest of New Spain, tells of the birth of the first Mexican *mestizo*: Don Martín Cortés, son of Hernán Cortés and the high-born native American woman who came to be called Doña Marina by the Spaniards and *Malintzin* by the Aztecs—both terms of high respect.⁴ I will have more to say about her later.

Provisionally, then, let me restate the obvious first meaning of the word *mestizo*: the “mixed” (as the Latin original term makes clear) offspring of an Iberian father and a Native American mother, with *mestizaje* as the name of the condition of being *mestizo*. Jorge Gracia, in *Hispanic/Latino Identity*, points out that, generally in Latin America:

Mixing was so widespread that laws were enacted at various times during the colonial period in order to introduce some measure of control over intermarriages and interracial relations, but they proved ineffective. Indeed, the scale of this process has led one scholar to note that “No part of the world has ever witnessed such a gigantic mixing of races as the one that has been taking place in Latin America and the Caribbean since 1492.”⁵

To take a “non-innocent”⁶ view of the history of Latin American *mestizaje* is to see the shameful violence of rape, oppression, and institutional racism that was all too often its root and its fruit, and which cannot be yet said to be a thing of the past. Yet, it is also to come to see in *mestizaje* the central and distinctive key to Latin American ethnicity and culture. Certain important provisos must be

⁴ Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva España* (Madrid, 1632), Cap. 36.

⁵ Gracia, *Hispanic/Latino Identity*, 114. He quotes from Magnus Mörner, *Race Mixture in the History of Latin America* (Boston: Little & Brown, 1967).

⁶ This term is coined by Justo González in *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), esp. Chapter 5.

added: first, that large numbers of Africans were also thrown into the mix—so that *mulatez* (from the Spanish *mulato*, English mulatto) already has become a correlate and functionally equivalent term to *mestizaje* in these discussions; second, that none of the three colliding streams was in itself other than a mixture of ethnicities and cultures. Gracia makes the crucial observation that the only way in which the “New World” deserves that name, rather than in the discredited Eurocentric view that implies that this world did not exist until Europeans discovered it, is in this very important sense:

[T]he New World is not America, but the Hispanic world produced by the encounters. This is a world which amounts to more than the sum of its parts: Iberians, Amerindians, and African slaves. And if there is a New World, there is also an Old World. The Old World is not Europe, however, but rather the world which existed before the encounters. For Iberians, Amerindians, and African slaves it was a multifaceted world of many groups and cultures. The New World is the world of Hispanics, where all these cultures and peoples became increasingly interrelated and progressively separated from other cultures and peoples in general and from Europe, Africa, and Anglo America in particular. Before the encounters, there were the Portuguese, Castilians, Catalans, Aztecs, Yoruba, Inca, Congolese, and so on. After the encounters and the events they precipitated, there are in addition Hispanics.⁷

Mexican intellectual José Vasconcelos, in his 1925 work *La Raza Cósmica*, suggested the rise of a “cosmic race” through the mixing of all human races as the future and best hope, indeed the destiny, of humankind.⁸ Iberoamerican *mestizaje* was to become the prototype of the cosmic race, and was thus to be affirmed against what Vasconcelos called Anglo-Saxon “ethnic barricading”:

The ethnic barricading of those to the north in contrast to the much more open sympathy of those to the south is the most important factor, and at the same time, the most favorable to us, if one reflects even superficially upon the future, because it will be seen immediately that we belong to tomorrow, while the Anglo-Saxons are gradually becoming more a part of yesterday. The Yankees will end up building the last great empire of a single race, the final empire of White supremacy. Meanwhile, we will continue to suffer the vast chaos of an ethnic stock

⁷ Gracia, *Hispanic/Latino Identity*, 107.

⁸ *La Raza Cósmica: A Bilingual Edition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

in formation, contaminated by the fermentation of all types, but secure of the avatar into a better race. In Spanish America, Nature will no longer repeat one of her partial attempts. This time, the race that will come out of the forgotten Atlantis will no longer be a race of a single color or of particular features. The future race will not be a fifth, or a sixth race, destined to prevail over its ancestors. What is going to emerge out there is the definitive race, the synthetical race, the integral race, made up of the genius and the blood of all peoples and, for that reason, more capable of true brotherhood and of a truly universal vision.⁹

Vasconcelos's ideas were seriously flawed in a number of ways, obvious even in this short quotation, and he came to repudiate them himself. Nevertheless, his positive view of *mestizaje* and many of his ideals continue to inform the thought of Hispanic/Latino theologians. Roberto Goizueta, for example, speaks approvingly of Vasconcelos's work in describing the inclusive, empathic essence of an affirmed *mestizaje*:

Homogeneous communities turn persons and peoples into objects to be rationally manipulated to achieve unity; the mestizo community recognizes that every human being is a subject and can, thus, be known only as subjects are known, that is, through love. As an empathic fusion of cultures and races, the mestizo community does not set itself in opposition to other communities, as subject to object, in order to assert its racial and cultural superiority and impose these on the other communities. Instead, the mestizo community, precisely qua mestizo, is inherently open to other races and cultures. . . . the mestizo community thus strives for inclusivity while rejecting not only an atomistic self-sufficiency but also a monolithic, and hence abstract, uniformity. . . . This, for Vasconcelos, is the very meaning of love: an empathic fusion of others, in which particularity is preserved and affirmed as the very basis of an authentic unity. This love is what constitutes and defines the mestizo community.¹⁰

In a happy and much more productive contrast to the overly broad—one could say “cosmic”—idealism of Vasconcelos and his legendary *raza cósmica*, Virgilio Elizondo grounds his theological method on the particular—indeed,

⁹ Ibid., 20.

¹⁰ Roberto S. Goizueta, “La Raza Cósmica: The Vision of José Vasconcelos,” *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 1/2 (1994): 19. See also Roberto S. Goizueta, *Camínemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), esp. Chapter 4.

on his own personal—experience of *mestizaje* in the American Southwest and, even more specifically, as a Mexican-American Catholic in South Texas and San Antonio. Precisely because its particularity confers on his work a ring of reality that resonates in their own experience, no matter the obvious differences in details, Hispanic/Latino/a theologians of all national backgrounds have made it their own. Alex García-Rivera is right when he characterizes Elizondo's concept of *mestizaje* as the result of "the violent and unequal encounter between cultures."¹¹ He adds that an important corollary for Elizondo is that the genetic and cultural mixing that also "creates frontiers," borderlands whose *mestizos* are at the same time part of and aliens from the cultures that encounter each other there and in their very life experiences. Elizondo speaks of realizing this while living in Paris as a student:

I had always lived on the frontier between two worlds: Mexico and the United States. I had not chosen to live there and neither had I migrated there. In San Antonio I felt at home among my own. Yet all my life I had felt pulled in two opposing directions—the U.S. way of life and the Mexican way of life. Sometimes I felt the pull would be so great that it would rip me apart. But I could not run away either to the United States or to Mexico, for both were as much a part of me as I was a part of them.¹²

It is from that perspective that Elizondo envisioned the Galilean Jesus, a marginal *mestizo* identified with a borderland between the Hellenized culture of Imperial Rome and the culture of the Jerusalem social, intellectual, and religious elite:

As a Galilean, Jesus grew up in contact with diverse peoples and cultures, yet far from all the "centers of belonging"—political, intellectual, or religious. Rejected and put down by all the in-groups of their world, the Galileans had learned through their marginalization and suffering to relativize society's absolutes. Relativizing human categories of importance and belonging, their one source of security was their deep faith in the God who alone was capable of salvation. . . . God's love for the rejected and his identification with them is brought out in the genealogy of Jesus according to Matthew (1:1–16). It begins with a converted pagan, Abraham, passes through the patriarchs, the slaves of

¹¹ Alex García-Rivera, *St. Martín de Porres: The "Little Stories" and the Semiotics of Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 40.

¹² Virgilio Elizondo, *The Future Is Mestizo: Life Where Cultures Meet* (San Antonio: Virgilio Elizondo, 1988), x.

Egypt, a shepherd who became king (David), and a carpenter (Joseph). Besides Mary his mother the other women mentioned include Tamar, who prostituted herself (Gen. 38:6-26), Ruth, who was a foreigner, Rahab, a harlot (Josh. 2:1), and the wife of Uriah who committed adultery with David (2 Sam. 11:4). When God entered into human history, he took it as it was. Neither racism, nor purity of blood, nor purity of morals, nor social class was respected in the incarnation. Matthew's genealogy puts Jesus very much among the out-groups.¹³

Perhaps the simplest way to summarize Elizondo's reading of the implications of Jesus' ministry is in the three principles that he identifies: (1) the "Galilean principle": "what human beings reject, God chooses as His very own"; (2) the "Jerusalem principle: God chooses an oppressed people, not to bring them comfort in their oppression, but to enable them to confront, transcend and transform whatever in the oppressor society diminishes and destroys the fundamental dignity of human nature"; (3) the "resurrection principle": "only love can triumph over evil, and no human power can prevail against the power of unlimited love. Out of suffering and death, God will bring health and life."¹⁴ This resurrection principle is to be "implemented through the practice of a festive Christianity . . . the ritual festive celebrations of God's entry into the drama of our lives."¹⁵ At the very center of those celebrations, for Elizondo, is the figure of the Virgin of Guadalupe, whose apparition to Juan Diego in Tepeyac he calls "the very basis of our historical resurrection as a people." García-Rivera has singled out Elizondo's courageous methodological decision to ground his theological work on the "little stories" of his life experience and of the popular religion of the Mexican-American people:

Elizondo wanted to understand the "little stories" of popular religion not as a sociologist or anthropologist but as a theologian. Historically, popular religion has been studied, in the main, by social scientists. Elizondo is one of the few theologians who found the possibility of a "Big Story" in popular religion. He proposed that the task of a theologian ought to be not the "canonization or rejection" of the religious symbols of a people but a "continuous re-interpretation" of them with respect to the gospel. Such reinterpretation, he was

¹³ Elizondo, *Galilean Journey*, 55.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 103, 115.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 129.

convinced, would lead people to the "Big Story," a "deeper knowledge of the saving God."¹⁶

Elizondo takes the daring step of putting in the foreground the synthesis of traditions—what he calls "religious mestizaje"—that permeates all religions, historical Christianity included, and that, in the central symbol of the Virgin of Guadalupe, is central to Mexican and Mexican-American Catholicism:

Mexican mestizaje . . . can today play a positive role because its religious symbolism provides the synthesis of two apparently irreconcilable religions: Spanish Catholicism and the native American religions. The indigenous peoples of the Americas found the European religion incomprehensible, while the Catholic missionaries found the native religions abominable. Yet in the brown Lady of Guadalupe, a new synthesis was achieved that was acceptable to both. I am convinced that were it not for the Lady of Guadalupe, there would be no Mexico today. There would simply be New Spain and the descendants of the native peoples, co-existing but never merging into one people. Had there been no religious mestizaje, the barriers between the two groups would still be insurmountable.

Mexican culture and Mexican Catholicism were born in the brown Virgin of Guadalupe. Mexican Catholicism cannot be adequately understood through the theological categories of Western Europe, for its indigenous substratum permeates every fiber of the Mexican church. Yet it is no mere syncretism. It is profoundly Christian, although its modes of expression have not always been recognized as legitimate by outsiders.¹⁷

Jean-Pierre Ruiz has shown how the first book published about the image of Guadalupe, Miguel Sánchez's *Imagen de la Virgen María Madre de Dios de Guadalupe milagrosamente aparecida en México: Celebrada en su historia, con la profecía del capítulo doce del Apocalipsis* of 1648 interprets it, as the title indicates, in light of the "woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars . . . pregnant and . . . crying out in birthpangs, in the agony of giving birth" of Rev 12:1-2. This was not only, says Ruiz, a tribute to "the prevailing spirit of Iberian Counter-Reformation aesthetic orthodoxy," but clearly an attempt to co-opt "the traditional account of Guadalupe, a story directed towards the indigenous Nahuatl-speaking people of Mexico, and recast it on behalf of the criollos, the Mexican-born descendants of the Spanish

¹⁶ St. Martín de Porres, 11.

¹⁷ *Future Is Mestizo*, 107.

conquistadors, according to the conventional European apparition genre."¹⁸ Barely six months later, another work was printed in Mexico: Luis Laso de la Vega's Nahuatl account of the apparitions at Tepeyac, the *Huey tlamahuizoltica* (*By a Great Miracle*). This work includes the *Nican mopohua* (*Here Is Recounted*), which has become the standard account of the Tepeyac Mariophany.¹⁹ This work was "intended to promote Guadalupe among Nahuatl audiences, [and] appealed to its intended audience by drawing upon the canons of indigenous religious symbolism."²⁰ This is precisely the hermeneutical move that Elizondo makes, most explicitly in his 1997 book *Guadalupe: Mother of the New Creation*, in which he includes a full translation of the *Nican mopohua*, which he uses as his basic text.

Jorge Gracia makes similar observations about the place of Our Lady of Charity in the context of Cuban popular religion. He points out that, not only in the religious, but in all realms of culture, *mestizaje* (and, I would add, particularly "little-story" *mestizaje*) is not to be confused with assimilation or simple cultural destruction (both of these are "big-story" terms, not to be used prematurely in cultural analysis). It is, rather, a two-way street in which both cultures are changed.²¹ To understand, even to see that effect, one must look at the "little stories," at the levels of daily living and survival and of popular religious practice that *Mujerista* theology calls "*lo cotidiano*." Ada María Isasi-Díaz clearly states the point theologically:

For Latinas, popular religiosity also has another important role: it allows us to experience the sacred in our everyday lives. In many ways it makes it possible for us to live out religiosity as an intrinsic element of who we are and all that we do; it makes it possible to integrate the sacred and the secular. It is through the practices of popular religiosity that Latinas are aware of the sacred in the private as well as the public, in the personal as well as the social.²²

Let me add some visual garnish. As an example of *lo cotidiano* and the role of Guadalupe in it, see the drawings by artist J. Michael Walker on the following pages.

¹⁸ Jean-Paul Ruiz, "Biblical Interpretation from a U.S. Hispanic American Perspective: A Reading of the Apocalypse," in *El Cuerpo de Cristo: The Hispanic Presence in the U.S. Catholic Church*, ed. Peter Cassarella and Raúl Gómez (New York, Crossroad, 1998), 92.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 93.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

²¹ See *Hispanic/Latino Identity*, 115–9.

²² Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En la Lucha: In the Struggle: Elaborating Mujerista Theology* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 1993), 49.

III. RUTH

In the introduction to her commentary on the book of Ruth in the Interpretation series, Katharine Doob Sakenfeld contends that, whatever the final determination of the book of Ruth's date and its ideological position may be, the book conveys

an emphasis on instruction concerning the community's view of outsiders. David is foregrounded as the storyteller's means of legitimizing an inclusive attitude towards foreigners, perhaps especially toward foreign women. Even if it had lacked any reference at all to David, the story would still have been effective as entertainment and for teaching the importance of faithful concern for others beyond the call of duty. Ruth's concern for Naomi becomes a model for Boaz's eventual concern for Ruth. This theme of care for others is on the one hand heightened because of Ruth's Moabite ancestry; yet on the other hand, her outsider ancestry could lead those with an exclusivistic, in-group focused perspective to question the very point of the story. This same debate about the limits of neighborliness is raised in the question put to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29), to which Jesus responded with the story of the Good Samaritan. Who can be counted as faithful, and how far should the boundaries for exercising faithful concern extend? . . . Noting the repeated need to challenge narrow exclusivism in the life of the ancient community should remind readers that the story of Ruth addresses a perennial issue in the human community.²³

Sakenfeld seems to raise the issues of faithfulness and the limits of neighborliness at the "little-story" level, the same level at which Jesus chooses to answer them in the parable. Perhaps both the strength of the book of Ruth and its apparent irreducibility to one or another ideological position derive from the fact that it is more about questions than about answers, and that it mirrors the inevitable ambiguity that our daily lives take on, particularly in the borderlands.

Robert D. Maldonado criticizes both Elizondo's presentation of the Guadalupe symbol as one that emphasizes almost exclusively its positive aspects and the apparent difficulty his scheme finds in including the non-mestizo native populations of Latin America.²⁴ Maldonado contrasts Elizon-

²³ *Ruth* (Louisville: John Knox, 1999), 4-5.

²⁴ Robert D. Maldonado, "¿La Conquista? Latin American (Mestizaje) Reflections on the Biblical Conquest," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 2/4 (1995): 5-25.



Ironing, Thinking

By J. Michael Walker, © 1996, color pencil on paper



Letter From Her Son

By J. Michael Walker, © 1996, color pencil on paper



The Virgin in the Arms of St. Joachim
By J. Michael Walker, © 1996, color pencil on paper



Virgin Icon

By J. Michael Walker, © 1996, color pencil on paper

do's position to the well-known work of Gloria Anzaldúa.²⁵ This Texan, lesbian-feminist writer expresses the profound ambiguity at the heart of Chicana/mestiza culture through three, not one, "mothers": Guadalupe, La Malinche, and La Llorona. La Malinche, historically the Aztec woman who became the Spaniards' Doña Marina, symbolizes the ambiguity of betrayal and assimilation. While *malinche*, in the vernacular of Mexico and the borderlands, has come to mean "traitor, betrayer to foreigners," Anzaldúa reverses the sign of the symbol:

Not me sold out my people but they me. Malinali Tenepat, or Malintzín, has become . . . the bad word that passes a dozen times a day from the lips of Chicanos. Whore, prostitute, the woman who sold out her people to the Spaniards are epithets Chicanos spit out with contempt.

The worst kind of betrayal lies in making us believe that the Indian woman in us is the betrayer. We, indias y mestizas, police the Indian in us, brutalize and condemn her. Male culture has done a good job on us. . . . Not me sold out my people but they me. Because of the color of my skin they betrayed me. The dark-skinned woman has been silenced, gagged, caged, bound into servitude with marriage, bludgeoned for 300 years, sterilized and castrated in the twentieth century. For 300 years she has been a slave, a force of cheap labor, colonized by the Spaniard, the Anglo, by her own people.²⁶

She is "the raped mother whom we have abandoned," and, Anzaldúa adds, as she waits for her true voice to be heard, "*Coatlalopeuh* [Guadalupe] waits with her."²⁷

In an article that appeared in *Semeia* 72, an issue entitled "Taking It Personally: Autobiographical Biblical Criticism," Maldonado brings what he calls a *malinchista* perspective to a reading of Ruth:

I adopt Malinche as the perspective for recasting my meta-autobiographical narrative. I do not presume to *have* her perspective, but in the dissonance between her idio-autobiographical data and the (Con)Quest plot, I can catch glimpses of ways to look back at myself. La Malinche lived in the interstices of her culture and the new Spanish one. She lives in the interstices of history and myth. A *malinchista* biblical hermeneutics, therefore, has some profound ironies layered in

²⁵ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 2d ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 44–5.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

it. . . . The *Malinchista* does adopt to some extent foreign perspectives, (e.g. biblical criticism). Moreover, a *malinchista* biblical hermeneutic moves beyond even a hermeneutics of suspicion to explore the levels of betrayal, especially of religious and cultural identity, in the biblical tradition.²⁸

Maldonado lays out the classic dichotomy that readers of the Old Testament have long observed between the negative view of marriage with foreigners represented by Ezra and the surface meaning of the book of Ruth. But the latter, Maldonado says, is a profoundly ambiguous book:

On the one hand, the story can be read as written against Ezra; as a testament to ethnic universalism, where even the enemy Moab is welcomed. Kinship is so open, that a (former?) Moabite can become the ancestor of David—and by extension of Jesus. On the other hand, even after she joins Naomi and the Israelites, Ruth continues to be referred to as the Moabite. In this reading, rather than fostering ethnic universalism, the book of Ruth testifies to failed assimilation. No matter how far you went you could never leave your ugly past behind. One way to more positively construe the Moabite references in the book of Ruth would be to see them not as reminding her of her ugly past but as welcoming her to keep her original identity. This reading is difficult to sustain in the light of the anti-Moabite, anti-mixture rhetoric found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. . . . This conflicted image of Ruth raises the pungent question: Could Ruth be a Moabite *Malinche*?²⁹

By means of an analysis of the use of *dāvaq*, *nokrî*, and *mô'āb* in the book of Ruth and in the Old Testament, Maldonado reaches what he terms "conflicted and problematic results for Latin American *mestizaje*." Ruth's identity remains, in the end, ambiguous. "The ambiguity is serious and no more easily resolvable than La Malinche's. Neither are *simply* traitors. Both have interstitial agency."³⁰

With more than a touch of irony, Cherokee biblical scholar Laura E. Donaldson comments, in "The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth Through Native Eyes," that "Maldonado answers his own question [Could Ruth be a Moabite Malinche?] with a strong 'maybe'"—a comment that is not alto-

²⁸ Robert D. Maldonado, "Reading Malinche Reading Ruth: Toward a Hermeneutic of Betrayal," *Semeia* 72 (1997): 99–100.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

gether undeserved.³¹ Against Maldonado, Donaldson advances a “big-story” view, in which the “big story” is a total rejection of what she sees as assimilationism in the book of Ruth:

American Indians have a much more suspicious attitude toward the privileging of mixedness, be it *mestizaje*, *metissage* or life in the borderlands. After all, “mixing” is precisely what Thomas Jefferson proposed as the final solution to the seemingly irresolvable “Indian problem”. To a visiting delegation of Wyandots, Chippewas and Shawnees he confidently predicted that “in time, you will be as we are; you will become one people with us. Your blood will mix with ours; and will spread, with ours, over this great island.” And what better way to accomplish this conmingling than with the paradigm of intermarriage that we glimpse in the book of Ruth? Indeed, one could argue that this “moment of serenity in the stormy world of the Hebrew Bible” exists as the prototype for both the vision of Thomas Jefferson and all those who facilitated conquest of indigenous peoples through the promotion of assimilation.³²

As the title of her essay indicates, Donaldson finds the only hope for reading the book of Ruth as anything other than “a tale of conversion/assimilation and the inevitable vanishing of the indigene in the literary and social text” in the “counter-narrative—a kind of anti-Pocahontas” in Orpah, “the woman who returned to her mother’s house.”³³

I find that I stand closer to Maldonado’s view than to Davidson’s. *Mestizaje* is not to be confused with assimilation, neither is an *ajiacó* a melting pot. It is painful, ambiguous, confusing, and confused—along with many more negatives that could be added to the richness and the taste. Gustavo Pérez Firmat, a Cuban exile poet, begins one of his poems with the line “*Soy un ajiacó de contradicciones*” (“I am an *ajiacó* of contradictions”), a line that could serve as the *mestizo* motto.

One of the best studies of Ruth as a character to appear in recent years, Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn’s *Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth*, reads Ruth as “a character whose self is not totally eclipsed in its selflessness, a character whose motives, like most person’s motives, are mixed.”³⁴ And while they do not identify it as such, I

³¹ In *Ruth and Esther*, ed. Athalyah Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999),

137.

³² *Ibid.*, 137.

³³ *Ibid.*, 141.

³⁴ (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990). Another recent work that acknowledges its debt to Fewell and Gunn is Tod Linfelt’s commentary on Ruth in the Berit Olam series (*Ruth and Esther* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1999]).

find myself agreeing with their portrayal of a strong *mestiza* Ruth. Take, for example, their reading of the passage most often subject to assimilationist/conversionist readings, Ruth's speech to Naomi in 1:16:

Ruth's speech does more, of course, than attempt to jar Naomi back to reality. Her willingness to change people and gods is also a response. Might she not perceive Naomi's discomfort with her Moabite daughters-in-law? And, since for Naomi, everything has religious roots, might Ruth not perceive that the discomfort with the two young women has religious roots as well? YHWH is punishing Naomi—that Naomi claims loudly enough—but for what? Is Moab the unspoken reason? Does Ruth therefore attempt to tame that fear by removing its theological roots? Understand the speech thus and we may hear her saying to Naomi: If you are worried that to continue association with a foreign woman with foreign gods is to invite further disaster, then don't worry, for I can fix that; I'll change people—your people will be *my* people!—and I'll change gods as well—your god will be *my* god!³⁵

Robert Maldonado says in his *Semeia* article: "I hear La Malinche chuckle as she looks over my shoulder."³⁶ I do too. I think Anzaldúa is right, and there is another who waits with her as well. Both are inseparably reflected in Ruth, and in countless other human beings whose "little stories" of faithfulness and abandonment, of selflessness and self-assertion, of crossing borders and bearing seed are refracted through hers.

For the final garnish, let me share a poem about a text: Richard Blanco's "Found Letters from 1965: El Año de la Agricultura." The text consists of two letters written by sisters—the first by a sister who stays to the sister who leaves, the second (never sent) the reply by the sister who decides to leave. The "big story" here is—depending on your ideological position—either the triumph of the Cuban Revolution or the fall of Cuba into the pit of Communist captivity. Of course, I love the poem because it really is about the "little story" of these women and their lives. There is famine (or at least lack and scarcity of food) in this text, husbands are gone (or at least exiled), and one woman "betrays" her family in order to preserve her loyalty. But let the poem tell itself:

Found Letters from 1965: El Año de la Agricultura

I. Received by my mother from her sister,
December 1, 1965, Cienfuegos, Cuba

³⁵ Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising Redemption*, 96.

³⁶ "Reading Malinche," 95 n. 11.

*"A brief letter which perhaps may be the last,
now that we have each chosen different paths.
I understand you are definitely leaving."*

The glorious seventh year of *la Revolución*,
unanimously declared the year of AGRICULTURA,
the State decrees the harvests must double.
Whichever generous goddess may be,
el espíritu—the one deity in the rock
of this island who chose the *guajiro*,
and listens to *machete* prayers, listened:
out of red earth rose the canes, rose the corn;
thousands of coffee-bean eyes—the mountains saw,
the valleys yawned mouthfuls of mangos.

*"Why, what else do you need, food? Not even.
You have arroz and frijoles criollos;
true, they were expensive, but . . ."*

tons of sweetening *azúcar*
tons of enlivening *café* tons of tempting *mangos*—
exports for the foreign palate,
while they let you eat *arroz y frijoles*

*"I never thought you would make such a decision,
since you have never been endangered by la Revolución."*

The same glorious year, the visas arrive
with the brand of a *contra-revolucionaria*.
Like the harvest, now you begin to double
into one who leaves, and one who remains.
The hands that want to leave are tired
of soaking beans, stealing sugar from the mill,
boiling vats of rice pudding for tired mouths
forced to greet friends with "*bola compañero*,"
forced to swallow the vinegar of citizen patrols.
The ears leave the whispers and speeches,
the hammer of machine guns and promises;
The eyes that want to close and run, sleep open,
against the required glossy of El Comandante,
his neoclassical hand lifted above you.
Bendito Hermes, Mercurio, Eleguá —

all gods of *los caminos* guide you,
the hands, the ears, the eyes that leave.

*"And now you so easily leave all your possessions
to your enemy— el Gobierno."*

The State allows one suitcase, take anything except:
your *Quince* pin, diamond chips set in plated gold—

PROPERTY OF THE STATE

the wedding rings and Catholic saint charms,
an *azabache* pendant to protect against evil spirits—

PROPIEDAD DEL ESTADO

your *pesos cubanos* and your child's toys, gracias—

DONATIONS TO THE STATE

nudes of your son on the dresser splashing violet water,
you, posed coyly in chin-high pants mated against a palm,
black-and-white images of your husband in uniform peeling
from the black pages of construction paper photo albums

MEMORIES OF THE STATE

But you search for a way to smuggle the perfume—
one part smoke of sugarcane cuttings smoldering,
two parts spray of citrus split open with incisive fingers,
one part rainfall evaporating and cane juice boiling;
three parts the rum *décimas* of *guajiro* guitars
four parts fields of mild winter skies seeded with stars—
an *eau de toilette* for pulses at the wrists and temples
on foreign days when you will have no language,
only the intimacy of memory's scents.

*"In a strange country, you may have all you need . . .
at the price of being separated from your family
which you know you will never see again."*

Primo Felipe, Tía Delia, Claudia Pérez your neighbor,
 your sisters: Gloria, Tania, Alina; Rodríguez the baker;
 Tío José, your brother Sergio, and your *Mamá*—

FAMILY OF THE STATE

II. My mother's reply to her sister,
 December 10, 1965, Cienfuegos, Cuba

*"I have chosen no path, I am simply fulfilling
 the destiny my life affords me"*

At the end of the glorious *año* you take
 the road curling away from your town,
 the sugarcane fields transform into a farewell of mirrors
 reflecting all the images you will never see again:
 the mill clock, the reservoir; raw sugar in your hands,
your clouds, *your* moon, moving over *your* land
 of polished fruits ripening on the branch,
 of palm tree rustle and shadows on the ground,
 of coconuts hatching in a splash of splinters.
 You remember your mother's eye gestures,
 powdering your cheeks, penciling your eyebrows;
 your father at a bowl of hot cornmeal,
 eating in the dignity and good silence of your home.

*"The ideas and concepts which bind family should
 reign above all other concepts, religious or political."*

You reach Havana for the last time,
 the mirrors recede—*el fin* of your life's reel,
 a sea of still tarmac spread before you,
 and a set of stairs leading into the airplane's belly.
 Everything coalesces to a point, the projection
 of all the gods of *la Revolución*, all the harvests,
 all the years add up to the moment you cross
 the platform and look back one last time
 to face the retreating template of the island,
 and scribble relatives' names, birth dates,
 addresses, your favorite poems and flowers—
 convinced that you will forget these things.

The propeller blades hum suicidally, you pause
to scan lines of the letter you've written,
the same letter I now find, thirty years later,

for lies:

*"At no time have political concepts
influenced my decision to leave my country . . . "*

for fears:

*"In a strange country the future is unknowable . . .
will I lose those I leave behind . . . "*

for courage:

*"I hurt at the thought of separating from all of you and Mamá,
but I have chosen a husband, I have united my life,
together, our destiny leads us to another country . . . "*

repeat it:

*"together, our destiny leads us to another country.
I am not the first nor the last woman
to do such a thing."³⁷*

³⁷ Richard Blanco, "Found Letters from 1965: El Año de la Agricultura," *City of a Hundred Fires* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998), 50-4. Reprinted by permission of the University of Pittsburgh Press.

How Do You Read?

by RICHARD LISCHER

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IN HIS BOOK *The Impossible Vocation*, John Snow says that the aim of ministry is “the construction of a world in which Christian symbols make sense.”¹ He is speaking of pastoral counseling, but his words are equally true of preaching. Every week the preacher takes a thin slice of literature called a text and conjures from it a world in which God belongs. In what follows I explore how preachers help their congregations read the scripture.

At the center of our vocation there lies an imaginative act of interpretation. Not only are we the people of the book, but when we open the book to interpret it, we encounter other interpreters, not unlike ourselves, doing the same thing. It is like looking at a portrait of someone painting a portrait of someone painting a portrait.

Turning to Luke 10, for example, we come upon an exegetical discussion between Jesus and a lawyer. When the lawyer quizzes him about an important religious issue, Jesus refers him to scripture they hold in common and asks, “What is written in the law? How do you read?” This is a familiar setup in the New Testament: “Is it not written?” “What do the scriptures say?” “Have you not read?”

What usually follows such questions is a radical rereading of the scripture in support of a radical new truth. It is Jesus rereading Isaiah to a tough audience in Nazareth. It is Paul explaining the evangelical significance of Abraham to the Galatians. It is Matthew repeatedly announcing the fulfillment of scriptures.

What is written? How do you read? The first question has to do with what lawyers would call black-letter law. What is found in the statutes and common law? The second question has to do with interpretation, performance,

¹John H. Snow, *The Impossible Vocation: Ministry in the Mean Time* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1988).

and the habit of thinking like a lawyer (or a preacher). How do you read? What do you make of it? What does it mean in this instance?

After two thousand years, plus three in seminary, we *know* what is written. We can make out the black marks on the white page. But from early Monday morning to late Saturday night the preacher never stops worrying about the second question, How do you read?

Throughout history, biblical interpreters have often answered the "how" question by means of a "what." Fundamentalists have celebrated the character of the *book* with all its perfections, as if to suggest that the objective accuracy and clarity of the book leaves little room for differences of interpretation. In similar fashion, liberals have examined the character of the *world* in which the book was produced and, in their own way, have relativized important matters of interpretation. Given what we know about the violent, patriarchal, prescientific prejudices that shaped the world in which the Bible was written, how can it speak authoritatively to us? What can it possibly offer beyond a few universal principles? Both approaches to the attributes of the book abstract the Bible from its use in the church's worship, catechesis, and pastoral care.

Most church people instinctively know that the Bible is not a perfect book. They also know that it offers them more than a few guiding principles. For them the Bible is a trusted and wise friend who never lets them down. It is *scripture*. How often in the lobby of a hospital or elevator does the pastor make one last check of the Psalm of the day before entering the ward? The parishioner, though frightened and weakened by illness, whispers the Psalm along with her pastor and takes refuge in it.

Church people instinctively take the measure of their lives in the mirror of the Bible's personages and teachings. I remember a man who struggled heroically with his wife's disease and his children's problems, only to be stricken with gallbladder illness himself. It was the last straw. He codified his fate very simply. "I must be Job," he said.

Preachers engage the hermeneutical task formally, parishioners less formally, but they all never cease making connections between realities portrayed in the Bible and the events of their own lives. Moreover, when these Christians gather for worship, their liturgy, prayers, readings, and hymns are saturated with the language-world of the Bible, which they embrace as normative for their understanding of themselves and God. Indeed, if pressed, some would claim that their little parish church prolongs or in some way replicates the religion of the Holy Bible.

The church is the social location in which the New Testament was written and in which the majority of Christians still reads it. If the preacher is looking

for an alternative to the fundamentalism that worships the book and the liberalism that marginalizes it—let him or her listen to how the people of God actually use the Bible. The Bible is best interpreted on location among those who are drawing on it for sustenance, because believers are most likely to capture, however intuitively, the Bible's original purpose by becoming active participants in its subject matter. What interpretive precision they lose by not being objective they more than regain by their practices of identification and participation.

Following the work of theologian George Lindbeck, it has become fashionable to talk about how our stories are absorbed into the biblical story. To be the people of God means to live a different story. Of course, that is all theologically true but, as any pastor knows, empirically problematic. The problem is that many of the people of God, while honoring scripture, do not really know it that well.

In my last pastorate I was disappointed to find that, of my twenty-nine catechism students—sons and daughters of the Reformation all, and only weeks away from lifelong status as “dyed-in-the-wool Lutherans”—only *one* knew the answer to the question “What did Jesus say to the thief on the cross who believed in him?” It is not important that people do not know the facts, chapters, and verses of the Bible. Surely, however, in some distant nursing home, hospital, prison, or life-crisis those kids, who are now in their mid-thirties, will *need* the exact words of the promise: “You shall be with me in paradise.”

It is not literacy that we are after. There is nothing inherently good about knowing the contents of the Bible. We need to know what is in the Bible because it contains the promise of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which alone has the power to move us from death to life (and to confound the many bogus gospels all around us). We read the Bible because it will help form us for discipleship and life in community. How do you read the Bible in such a way that it does what it was meant to do?

My unsettling confirmation story reminds us that our most important hermeneutical category is not sociological, psychological, or political—but theological. We read the Bible evangelically. We read it because it is filled, not with good stories, but with good news about the character and disposition of God. The Methodist theologian Carl Michalson defined the gospel as God's turning toward us in Jesus Christ, the idea being that you do not want a God who is turning away from you at critical moments. God is *for* us and has promised to be so for Israel, the church, the poor, the persecuted, and the outsider. When you really catch on to the promise in the Bible, or—as my

former professor Robert Bertram used to say—when you read a text in such a way that it *necessitates* Christ, the whole scripture opens to you.

Not too many years ago I had a friend who was dying. In my conversations with her I noticed that she read the Bible differently than I, and radically so. As a matter of principle, I acknowledged the importance of the gospel in the Bible; but she clung to it and claimed it for herself. She had become a kind of hermeneutical magician. She could find the promise of God in any passage. “Now Nimrod was an hunter”? No problem. “Tohu was the son of Zuph, the Ephraimite”? No problem. The straw letter of James? No problem. For her, reading was an everyday exercise in praying, claiming, and being claimed, which is what it should be for everyone who opens the book, even preachers. My friend would have seconded the comment by the poet Adrienne Rich: “Read,” she said, “as if your life depended on it.”

In the library of the seminary in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania they can show you the bloodstains in their books (not every library can boast of bloodstained books). The stains are there because in the battle so many were wounded that they ran out of pillows. They laid the heads of the wounded in the opened books from the library. The church’s book, too, is stained with the cost of God’s love. That is why we read it—because our lives do depend on it.

The preacher is like a gemologist who turns the precious stone this way and that in order to capture its brilliance, the way the rabbis sought to bring out the “perfection” of the text. So the interpreter rotates the passage against the light, viewing it from every angle, until it discloses God’s truest character, which for the believer has already been revealed in the bright and shining face of Jesus Christ.

I embrace this evangelical hermeneutic as a gift of illumination for the preacher. Or, to use Carl Michalson’s image, God’s faithfulness toward us is the compass that charts the course for our interpretation of scripture. We know that all interpreters operate with such a guiding star. If someone were to have asked Martin Luther King Jr., “How do you read?” I think he would have answered, “I read by the light of two revelations in tension with one another: liberation and love, exodus and redemption.” In one of his sermons at Ebenezer he cried out, “Every time God speaks, he says, ‘Move forward!’” Yet, the character of that liberation is always determined by the character of God’s love revealed in Jesus Christ. That is how King read.

I embrace this evangelical hermeneutic as a gift of freedom for the preacher. It is in seminary that we first learn to view the Bible as a problem. There we are reintroduced to it as an alien document that one cannot possibly understand except by means of various specialized techniques. In too many seminaries the introductory Bible courses are a form of *bazing* of the

uninitiated that can produce cynicism toward the text precisely where one would expect to find reverence. Instead of beginning with the truth of God's goodness revealed in the Bible, and letting that guide our reading, we often begin with the many factors that distance the book from us, which include the patriarchalism, chauvinism, and prescientific worldview of those who wrote it. These factors are all serious and must be taken into account in interpretation, but if we start from those norms, it is difficult—if not impossible—to arrive at a receptivity to the true character of God. The preacher winds up apologizing for God, the way spin doctors tell you what the candidate *really* meant, rather than offering the deliverance, love, peace, joy, and reconciliation for which our God is famous.

Of course, the Bible *is* a culturally distant book. As someone has said, reading the Pauline epistles is like opening other people's mail. Their message does not appear to have been addressed to us at all. We can understand each word; it is the sentences that perplex us! The framework of writer and addressees is murky. Several years ago our family found a letter written by my future great-grandfather to my future great-grandmother. It contained this sentence: "Surely, Miss Laura, you are not insensible of the constraints which both nature and fortune have laid upon me in the matter of our mutual necessity." Here historical and rhetorical investigations are indispensable. What *did* nineteenth-century Kentuckians mean when they spoke of "mutual necessity"? That was code for what? Consider these words of Paul to the Corinthians: "I have been a fool! You forced me to it. Indeed you should have been the ones commending me, for I am not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing." To this we add to our puzzled congregations, "Word of God for the people of God."

Contrast these problems with the conviction of early medieval scholars who, says Beryl Smalley, "thought of Scripture as a letter addressed to them by God."² Many Christians have honored the "oracular" power of scripture, by which individuals appropriate the word as if it the usual laws of literary transmission were suspended and it was meant for them alone.³ One thinks of Augustine, who, deep in his crisis of faith, hears the child cry, *Tolle, lege*, "Pick it up, read it." He flings open his Bible and lets it speak directly to him. Or consider Jarena Lee, the African Methodist, who was transfixed by one sentence from scripture in Bishop Richard Allen's church in Philadelphia; or Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was reading other people's mail in New York City

²*The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 27.

³See James L. Kugel and Rowan A. Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia, Westminster, 1986), 193.

in 1939, more specifically, Timothy's mail from Paul: "Do your best to come before winter," which Bonhoeffer received as a message addressed to him. He took it to heart and returned to Germany. In all his theology he did not use the scripture this way. But in his lectures on homiletics he did counsel his students to this effect: "Whenever you are tempted to say, 'The Evangelist says,' or 'The apostle says,' try saying, 'God says.'"

In his lovely preface to his Christmas sermons, *What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels*, Luther gives his own answer to the question How do you read?

When you open the book containing the Gospels and read or hear how Christ comes here or there, or how someone is brought to him, you should therein perceive the sermon or the gospel through which he is coming to you, or you are being brought to him. For the preaching of the gospel is nothing else than Christ coming to us, or we being brought to him. When you see how he works, however, and how he helps everyone to whom he comes or who is brought to him, then rest assured that faith is accomplishing this in you and that he is offering your soul exactly the same sort of help and favor through the gospel. If you pause here and let him do you good, that is, if you believe that he benefits and helps you, then you really have it.⁴

How does this hermeneutical key offer freedom to the preacher? When you really do "have it," as Luther said, there is no fundamental discrepancy between *who you are* and *your interpretive acts*. When you really do have a view of the God of your salvation, you cannot utterly or abjectly misinterpret the biblical text!

So far, you might have noticed some circularity in my argument. How can we begin with God's character as a hermeneutical guide when it is precisely God's character that remains to be discovered by reading the Bible? When you read the book, are you already supposed to know the ending?

Yes. But how?

If our first inquiry is *How* do you read? the second might be *With whom* do you read? One of the many pleasant things about reading to children is that they need you to be there for both the scary parts and the happy parts of the story. They want to read with someone who already knows the story and can guarantee its ending for them. The whole point of reading is that you do it together. You read the Bible in the company of those who already know the ending. You read with those who taught you what to look for and expect when you open the scripture. You read with those who have taught, modeled,

⁴*Luther's Works*, ed. Helmut T. Lehman (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-1986), 35:122-3.

and embodied the love of God in Jesus Christ in the first place. You read with the church. You read with your parents, grandparents, pastors, siblings, friends, neighbors, teachers. You read with the saints.

How do the saints read the Bible? In his book *Religious Reading*, Paul J. Griffiths makes an elaborate distinction between what he calls the *consumerist* method of reading the Bible and a *religious* reading.⁵ If Adolf von Harnack said the historian's duty is to get intellectual control of the object, the consumerist would add, "And as quickly as possible." The consumerist *guts* the book, the way you slap a bass on the sink to clean it. You want to eviscerate it as quickly as possible. We have limited time for the weekly exegesis, so limited, in fact, that we convince ourselves that we do not have time for praying the text, meditating upon its meaning, or praying for our parishioners—unless, course, such activities will produce a more successful sermon.

What I am about to say will sound like heresy to students and busy pastors, but the religious reader is a slow reader. If anything gets gutted in reading, it will be the reader, not the text. The consumerist shines a flashlight on the text and says, "Tell me all you know." The religious reader allows the spotlight of the Spirit to illumine his or her own life and that of the congregation. "O Lord, thou hast searched me and known me." The religious reader already knows the ending, so he or she is free to enjoy the story.

Griffiths's distinctions help define the growing chasm between two powerful interpretive traditions: scientific criticism and theological exegesis. I define the latter as biblical interpretation that is sifted through the life, doctrines, and practices of the community for which it was intended and in which it originated, the church. Theological exegesis is the church reading its book. We read it as if it is addressed to our particular community (as if our lives depended on its conclusions), yet in the conviction that its authority reaches far beyond the local community. Within the community, theological exegesis reads the Bible as a means of rendering the risen Christ and making him present to faith. It assigns particular texts for reading and sets them within the warp and woof of the whole Bible and the church's dogma.

I preached recently on the ascension of Jesus. I had never preached on the ascension because, as everyone knows, the Lord ascended on a Thursday, and we do not have church on Thursdays, which meant that I never had to make homiletic sense of the ascending, triumphant Christ as he ends one ministry in the flesh and begins another in the power of the Holy Spirit. In the Gospel

⁵*Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

of Luke the ascension marks the end of a life in which nothing more can happen. The Gospel ends with Jesus blessing his disciples as he rises, the way the minister might do so at the conclusion of the service. In the Acts of the Apostles, on the other hand, the ascension signals the beginning of a new and exciting adventure in mission.

Why had I been so intimidated by the ascension? I thought I had to explain how it happened in such way that would satisfy modernist objections. I thought I had to demythologize it, then retheologize—or, worse, moralize—it, and then apply it to suburban life with no fewer than three gripping illustrations. Yet, despite my reluctance to tackle the ascension, the church tackles it every Sunday when it recites its rule of faith: “He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.” The church says the creed, not in order to explain the more obscure facts about Jesus, but to affirm God’s triune identity and to make a statement about who we are in relation to it. It does so by linking the ascension with Christ’s resurrection and with his session at the right hand of God (which, Luther said, means everywhere). Furthermore, the church has chosen a strategy for “reading” the ascension. It has appointed a Psalm, Psalm 47, by which to guide our response to the ascension of Jesus. While I have heard sermons that “read” the ascension as an ominous foreshadowing of the modern loss of God—of the loneliness of humanity beneath the empty skies of God’s absence—the church does not see it that way. The Psalm appointed for worship on Ascension Day helps us read the event differently. It preaches joy: “God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet” (Ps 47:5).

In some inchoate way the church has said that the event of God’s authority over all would-be gods, as performed by the king of Israel in the temple enthronement ritual, “happened again” when the Son of God ascended through the clouds, and happens again when the church commemorates that event. Imagine the scene in the temple when the God of Israel takes God’s place over the nations; imagine that scene when the Lord Jesus, with a host of captives in his train, enters heaven in triumph. These two scenes are related as figures in a tapestry. The ascension is not a lesson or a principle. It is an emblem. It is emblematic of our life, our mission, and our triumph over death, for the genius of the creed is that when we confess about God, “He ascended,” we are saying something about our own identity and future.

Both Psalm 47 and the book of Acts connect this elevation of God/Jesus to God’s rule over the nations, to politics. The ascension relativizes all the Herods, Agrippas, and tinhorn lords we meet in the book of Acts. The whole tapestry of the church’s mission will be laid out beneath the canopy of the

ascended Lord who is seated at the right hand of God. God reigns in the face of death and politics, Luke says. Let the mission begin.

Does this simple text mean all that? Is all that *in there*? Throughout the greater part of its history the church would have replied, "Oh yes, and much, much more."

I teach a course on preaching from the parables of Jesus. I doubt there is an academic book on the parables that does not include some condescending reference to Augustine's famous allegorization of the parable of the Good Samaritan, in which Jericho stands for mortality, the priest and levite the institutions of the old dispensation, the donkey Christ's human nature, the two coins present and future life, the inn the church, the innkeeper the apostle, and so on. You get the idea. We teachers then warn students, "Don't you ever fall into Augustine's mistakes!" Now, aside from the questionable-ness of premising any approach to biblical interpretation on the stupidity of St. Augustine, we might want to rethink our blanket condemnation of allegory. The church read the story in this way because that interpretation best reflected its life with God. The medieval church used texts like stained-glass windows, to emblazon the story of salvation. Such interpretations were scrupulously accurate renditions of the text.

Compare the tapestried, figural approach with the single-point doctrine of modern interpretation, and the latter seems rather thin. As a seminarian, Martin Luther King Jr. preached on this parable, and, following his sources in mid-century liberalism, what he got out of it was that the parable teaches one truth and only one, namely the importance of "altruism" in human relations. It is a disappointing sermon, if one is allowed to say that of Martin Luther King. Not long before he died he preached on another parable, "A Knock at Midnight" (also from Luke), in which a neighbor troubles a friend for provisions. This time King allegorizes the story with no less floridity than Augustine, telling his congregation that midnight stands for socially troubled times (like these); the knock on the door stands for the world asking the church for help; the bread stands for the spiritual nourishment that only the church can give; the neighbor's initial disappointment stands for the world's disillusion with the church's moral failures. King ends with a stunning climax in which he implores the church "to keep the bread fresh," to guard the integrity of the message. Now, which was the more responsible method of interpretation, the universal appeal to altruism, which satisfies the demands of civil morality, or the figural appeal, which is grounded in the church's mission?

Figural interpretation reminds us of the layered and woven character of preaching. The word *text* comes from the verb "to weave"—thus, *textile*.

Every text suggests several patterns of interpretation, and the preacher may perform a different one every year. In his book *Faithful Persuasion*, David S. Cunningham investigates the text in Matt 8:20, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head," and finds in the Christian tradition no fewer than nine distinct interpretations of the passage!⁶

Once we honor the church's methods of biblical interpretation, we will honor the church in our sermons. Linguistically, we will create a metaphoric or a symbolic world, over time, in which the reality of the people of God is central. It is odd, but we gather every Sunday as a group, pray for one another, receive the eucharist shoulder to shoulder, and sing our hymns in unison. We read from a book that records the history of a people, Israel. But all this togetherness in punctuated by a fifteen- or twenty-minute speech, a sermon, that is often dominated by appeals to universal truths or personal experiences.

Paradoxically, we expound a word written from the churches to the churches but in such a way that caters to individuals and does not form the body. We preach from a book whose most pervasive pronoun is "one another," as in "love one another," "welcome one another," "bear one another's burdens." But our favorite pronouns, like those of our culture, remain I, me, mine, and you (in the singular).

The sermon is a word from one church to another. Many of us were trained to remove the scandal of the church from the sermon. We learned to make sermon illustrations that associate the gospel with universally recognized truths, whether in psychology, politics, or morality. We clutter our sermons with "illustrations" drawn from every conceivable realm of life except that of the real life and struggles of the people of God. We preach *in* churches of course, but too rarely do we tell the story of the church with a vividness and goodness of its own. Yet, those who attend to sermons long to see a believable world of Christians depicted in them.

When I first began preaching in my rural congregation, the lessons that Epiphany season were from Ephesians. As it does to every preacher, Ephesians gave me a golden opportunity to speak of the church and of the many ways God was manifest in our parish. Beneath the cares and suffering of ordinary people, God *was* present to the people: In our community everyone took turns in patterning exercises for a little girl with cerebral palsy. We helped one another put up hay before the rains came. We grieved when a

⁶*Faithful Persuasion: In Aid of a Rhetoric of Christian Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 231.

neighbor lost his farm, and we refused to buy his tools at the auction. I did preach on the epiphany, but instead of showing how God was manifest in Jesus, I felt I first had to establish a category of human experience called "epiphanies" in general, universal moments of meaning or its absence to which all people are subject. Then I had to illustrate this category with long and depressing quotations from James Joyce's *Dubliners* and the novels of Walker Percy. I dragged my poor farmers through the ashes of my category as the prerequisite to the good news. I encouraged them to pretend that they too suffered from ennui and existential angst. When I finally got to the epiphany of God, it turned out to be an illustration of a greater truth.

All this talk of individual interpretive decisions may suggest that only the preacher interprets scripture. The preacher indeed gives the cues, but he or she only initiates a process that ends in the community's performance of the scripture. The most complete act of interpretation occurs not in the library, pastor's study, or even the pulpit, but when a community enacts the text that has been set before it.

So far we have asked: How do we read? Answer: we read evangelically, according to the character of God. With whom do we read? Answer: the saints. Now we ask: Who reads? Who interprets the Bible? Answer: the community interprets the Bible by its very attempt to live it.

So much has been written about *performance* that it is not necessary to defend it as a metaphor for the interpretation of the Bible. One who performs the Bible does not merely appeal to a body of truth and then make interesting applications of it. That notion leaves the believing subject still disconnected from its object, a disjunction that has never satisfied the religious imagination. In my views of performance, I have been helped by Nicholas Lash's seminal essay, "Performing the Scriptures," the contributions of Charles Bartow in speech theory, and my reflections on Martin Luther King's performative practices. I will draw on King for examples.

In preaching, performance of the scripture occurs in three phases: (1) in the individual speaker's articulation of the word of God, (2) in the assembly's liturgical actions, and (3) in the community's performance in the world. The interpretation of the word begins with its reading or rendering. The time and place of the reading, as well as its intonation, immediately generate an interpretation. When Ezra stood at the Water Gate and read the word, it was a way of announcing, "The Torah is back." When the members of the Open Door Community in Atlanta read the scripture in a homeless shelter, in a soup kitchen, or on the street, it is their way of saying, "God belongs here."

The preacher embodies the spirit of the text by the manner in which he or she reads it. Martin Luther King had a riff on the story in John 12 about some

Greeks who come to Philip saying, "We want to see Jesus." The ordinary preacher might prosaically explain the relation of Greek culture to Hebrew religion, but King *voices* the beauty of that culture by reciting the beautiful names of its greatest representatives: Aristophanes, Euripides, Thucydides, Demosthenes. In the same sermon he powerfully combines a profusion of classical names with a series of repetitions ending with the name "Jesus":

And Sir, they said, the radiant lights of philosophy, of poetry, or art, and of all earthly wisdom, hanging resplendent along our pathway are not sufficient to illuminate the way of life.

Sir, we would see Jesus, the light of the world.

We know about Plato, but we want to see Jesus.

We know about Aristotle, but we want to see Jesus.

We know about Homer, but we want to see Jesus.

His voice stabs at the first syllable of *Pla*-to and *Ho*-mer and drops at the end of each sentence to a gravelly yet intimate *Jee*-sus. The voicing itself witnesses to the finality of Jesus in a world of culture. King is performing the text.⁷

When the congregation listens attentively or, as in African-American and Pentecostal traditions, *helps* the preacher with stylized and coded feedback, the performance takes on corporate dimensions. Incidentally, the African-American response to the preacher, "Make it plain!" is great hermeneutical advice! In my first congregation in rural Illinois, I used to scan the congregation for a twitch of the eyebrow or a pursed smile among farmers, which is the Lutheran version of "Hallelujah, brother, preach!" When this happens, communication has become the achievement of the group.

The performance of the word occurs in a variety of liturgical settings. In the Lutheran churches of Zimbabwe the greatest liturgical fanfare is reserved for the reading and preaching of the word. Before the Gospel is read, a single voice materializes, as it were, from somewhere in the congregation announcing in the Shona language, "This is the word of God," to which the people respond, "We want to hear it." The chant continues antiphonally from voice to congregation with increasing hypnotic power, the whole place swaying like a wheat field in the breeze. Then the chanting abruptly stops as if forbidden, and someone stands and reads the Gospel from the midst of the people. In some churches the word evokes an altar call. In many it is followed by an

⁷Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Word That Moved America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 120-1.

offering and the eucharist. In countless ways the congregation performs the word of God in the sanctuary.

Neither the preaching performance nor the liturgical performance is the final performance. They are rehearsals for the congregation's faithful witness in the world. Like many young preachers, Martin Luther King was flattered by the congregation's vocal response to his sermons. "You really got into my pew this morning, Reverend," they seemed to say. But by the end of his life he had established a more rigorous criterion of sermon evaluation: Is the congregation enacting the text in the world? Do we talk a lot about prayer, or have we become a praying community? Do we speak piously about the homeless, or have we opened our church to them? Are we merely denouncing racism someplace else in the world, or are we doing something about it in our town? Are we merely condemning violence in the media, or are we encouraging our members to get rid of their guns?

King tells the story of the great worship service held at the victorious conclusion of the Montgomery boycott. The reader was appointed to read 1 Corinthians 13. When he came to the verse, "When I was child I spoke like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put away childish things," something peculiar happened. The congregation of three thousand people plus a thousand more in the churchyard spontaneously rose to its feet and began cheering. Why? Because they recognized themselves in the scripture. In their long struggle they had become performers of the text.

We have come a long way from *How do you read?*, which conjures the image of exegesis in a quiet library of leather books and muffled voices. We have moved away from romantic notions of the loneliness of the preacher and the text's single, inherent meaning. We have moved toward a variety of performances of the text, each guided by the goodness of God, each occurring under the big top of the church. How do you read? is still a valid question, but it can only be answered polyphonically by the whole people of God.

How do we read? We read together.

Something New out of Africa: Christian and African Spirituality Meet to Give Hope for World Humanity

by ALAN MAKER

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A LONG TIME AGO a proverb came into popular currency from a statement by Pliny: *ex Africa semper aliquid nova* (there is always something new from Africa).¹ That certainly would not garner much support nowadays, because what seems to come out of Africa is old, tired, and predictable—wars between nations, tribes in murderous conflict, hunger in impoverished countries, corruption in high places, an alarmingly high death rate from AIDS, and constant requests for financial assistance from the richer countries.

So, conflict, corruption, and poverty become the criteria through which anything coming out of Africa is judged. For example, the cynical have said that the current request for debt relief is the begging bowl coming once again to the fore. But is there not another perspective? Colonial, Arab, and western powers ripped millions of men, women, and children from their native homes to work as slaves on their plantations. Greedy, rich nations snatched as much of Africa's precious metals, minerals, and raw materials as they could to enrich their own economies and people. While it is unfair to judge people of a previous generation by current moral standards, it would be noble, ethically sound, and politically wise to make some gesture to the African continent to help its people break out of the circle of poverty in which so many of them are trapped.

A recent issue of *Time* carried a poignant letter from a young African, saying:

Despite fighting and corruption there is still a lot of hope in Africa. Don't write us off because of some problems. We Africans are saddened by what is happening in Sierra Leone, and not all of us support the

¹The saying from Pliny is as follows: "*Unde etiam vulgare Graeciae dictum 'semper aliquid novi Africam adferre'*"—Whence it is commonly said amongst the Greeks that 'Africa always offers something new'" (*The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 2d ed. [London: Oxford University Press, 1953], 380).

illegal take-over of white farms in Zimbabwe. We love our continent and our diversity. (No, we don't all speak Zulu or Swahili, and I have never worn a *dashiki* in my life). Stop viewing all of us with pity. We are not all starving or child soldiers or AIDS patients.²

Most people do not want facts to distort their perceptions and prejudices. Nevertheless, we ought at least to consider some positive aspects of the dark continent.

As Christians, we should be aware of the tradition that St. Mark established the church in Egypt in 42 C.E. Within the first two centuries of the modern era North Africa became one of the most powerful strongholds of Christianity, producing theological giants of the stature of Augustine of Hippo, Tertullian, and Cyprian. Some of the most eminent apologetic thinkers also came from that region: Clement, Origen, and Athanasius. Antony and Pachomius introduced monasticism that found its home in the arid deserts of Africa before spreading to Europe.³ South Africa, through its own pain, has produced at least two of the twentieth century's spiritual giants in Desmond Tutu and Beyers Naude.

It is both interesting and amusing to note that when President Clinton and Prime Minister Blair find it necessary to bolster their own domestic popularity, they invite Nelson Mandela to visit their countries on some pretext or other. When photographs of these leaders appear, it is very easy to see that it is the aging black man who is truly the revered world statesman.

There are some fifty-four nations on the African continent. In only ten of them, not all of them, are there serious problems. The Republic of Botswana, in fact, has the fastest growing economy in the world, admittedly off a low base.

Negativities abound, but we need to look beyond them to what is positive and hopeful. Maybe we should dig deeper than the appearances and try to discover what the African psyche has to teach the rest of the world. When one considers what Africans have done to Africans; considers what colonial, western, and Arab powers have done to Africans; and looks at the regular cycles of drought, hunger, floods, and fire that have brought devastation to millions, is it not surprising that African people come up smiling, dancing, and ready to start again?

Slaves, torn from their native soil, transported in appalling conditions, and forced to work themselves almost to death in the new world, sang their pain

²Kingsley Afemikhe, age 16, from Lagos, Nigeria, in *Time*, 19 June 2000.

³See Zablon Nthamburi, "Toward Indigenization of Christianity in Africa: A Missiological Task," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 13 (1989): 112-8.

and gave the world the spiritual, the blues, and jazz. While the prophet could only ask, "Is there no balm in Gilead?" (Jer 8:22), these slaves could sing positively, "There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole."⁴

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa revealed atrocities far beyond the knowledge of most South Africans, even those with a fair understanding of what had happened. What was astonishing was the lack of a desire for revenge, the absence of bitterness in so many who had suffered so much. The requests for reparations were not astronomical but for education for the children of those who had died, for medical attention, or, most poignantly, merely for a tombstone for a lost loved one.

We ought to divert our attention, at least for a moment, from Africa's metals, minerals, and raw materials, from its gold and diamonds to its spirit. We may be surprised to discover that there is yet something new to come out of Africa.

I. WHERE DID IT ALL BEGIN?

Although paleoanthropology is a relatively new science, some of its most famous practitioners have earned huge reputations—for example, Raymond Dart, Robert Broom, Mary and Richard Leakey, and Philip Tobias. The science has made some extraordinary discoveries and opened new doors to the understanding of human prehistory. The search for the origin of our genus, *homo sapiens sapiens*, reads like a murder-mystery novel—full of intrigues, personal animosities, scandals, fortuitous findings, and, finally, a fascinating conclusion.

Paleoanthropologists seem to be agreed that the first humans appeared in Africa. Early work indicated that this happened in the eastern part of the continent, but more recent discoveries have shifted the locus further south, to the southwest coast. Dr. Lee Berger, Professor of Paleoanthropology at the University of the Witwatersrand, writes of the excitement at the finding of well-preserved footprints on a beach at the Langebaan Lagoon, about an hour and a half by car north of Cape Town. Dave Roberts, a geologist, discovered them in 1995. They have been dated as having been imprinted into the sand some 117,000 years ago. After this discovery was announced the popular press immediately named them "Eve's footprints." Let Dr. Berger speak for himself:

"Eve," of course, refers not to the biblical Eve, but to a mitochondrial Eve, the proposed genetic progenitor of all living humans. The concept of a mitochondrial Eve is a scientific theory first coined by geneticists at

⁴*The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), Hymn 394.

the University of California during the 1980s. The term is used to illustrate the theory that all the world's peoples are descendants from a small population of anatomically modern humans that existed between 100,000 and 200,000 years ago. Their arguments were based on studies in molecular biology, particularly the occurrence of mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA), genes that are inherited only through the female lineage. The California team devised a statistical model to measure the rate of mtDNA mutation over time. What they found was that different populations of humans living in diverse areas of the world exhibited different degrees of variation. The variation between Africans was found to be greater than that between any other population grouping, indicating that people from that continent are older than those from anywhere else. Their genes have had more time to mutate. The inescapable logic of this argument is that all modern humans are in fact descended from a single female living in Africa over 100,000 years ago. . . . Combined with archaeological evidence, the research now strongly indicates that not only are all humans African in their origin, but our roots may well be in southern Africa—where the most consistent archaeological traces of the emergence of modern humans are to be found along the South African Cape coast.⁵

II. THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

We are unlikely to arrive at an exact date for the calling of Abraham, but it likely took place around 2000 B.C.E., a dating with which John Bright concurs.⁶ If Lee Berger is correct that his "Eve" made those footprints on the beach at Langebaan Lagoon 117,000 years ago, then African people had been wrestling with life's crucial questions for more than 110,000 years before the man we consider to be the father of faith appeared on the scene. Dr. Berger told me that the first fossils of *homo sapiens sapiens* to be found outside Africa were discovered in Israel and date some 45,000 years after "Eve."

All South African Bantu-speaking people believe in a god, the Creative Force. The Zulus called God *uNkulunkulu* or, more correctly, *uMvelinqangi*; to the Venda, God is *Raluvhimba*. The Sotho people describe their god as *Modimo*.⁷ In East Africa the Kikuyu call their deity *Ngai*.⁸ A modern Roman Catholic missionary makes this comment:

⁵Lee R. Berger, *In the Footsteps of Eve: The Mystery of Human Origins* (Washington, DC: Adventure Press, 2000), 6–7.

⁶John Bright, *A History of Israel* (London: SCM, 1966), Chronological Charts.

⁷Barbara Tyrrell, *African Heritage* (New York: MacMillan, 1983), 51.

⁸Nthamburi, "Toward Indigenization," 113.

For the Masai there is only one God, *Engai*, but he goes by many names. Sometimes they call him male, sometimes female. When he is kind and propitious they call him the black God. When he is angry, the red God. Sometimes they call him rain, since this is a particularly pleasing manifestation of God. But he is always the one, true God.⁹

In an extraordinary way, when Christian missionaries came to sub-Saharan Africa, they were bringing religion through a full circle. They were bringing the good news of God's perfect revelation in Jesus Christ to Africa where faith had its first stumbling beginnings. It should have been "deep calling to deep," but unfortunately they came with an arrogant assumption that their version of Christianity was the only pure religion while what they met was mere superstition, at best to be disregarded, and, at worst, destroyed.

Those early Christian missionaries were sincere and honest people accomplishing much that was good and noble. It would be unjust to claim that they only did harm. Nevertheless, they were unable to understand that they had too easily equated Christian truth with their civilization. Christianity certainly had had a profound influence on their way of life, but that did not mean that theirs was the only way. In 1935 Dietrich Westermann still clung to the opinion of those early missionaries: "However anxious a missionary may be to appreciate and retain indigenous social and moral values, in the case of religion he has to be ruthless . . . he has to admit and even to emphasize that the religion he teaches is opposed to the existing one and the one has to cede to the other."¹⁰ This merely followed the judgment of the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference, which concluded that African traditional religions were "animism" containing "no preparation for Christianity."¹¹

III. EARLY MISSIONARY ENDEAVOR IN SOUTH AFRICA

The Dutch East India Company dispatched Jan van Riebeck to the Cape in 1652 to establish, not a colony, but a market garden to supply provisions for ships on their long voyages to the East Indies. Spiritual needs there were first met by a "sick visitor" and only later by an ordained minister. Missionary work was not a high priority largely because the good Christian burghers believed that the San and Khoi people were so dissolute and depraved that they were unlikely vessels for Christianity.

⁹Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982), 42.

¹⁰Quoted in Kwame Bediako, "The Roots of African Theology," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 13 (1989): 58-65.

¹¹"Report of Commission IV: The Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions with Supplement, Presentation and Discussion of the Report in the Conference on 18th June 1910" (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1910).

In 1737 the United Brethren of Moravia sent Georg Schmidt to the Cape to work among the Khoi people. After some time he established a Moravian community at Genadendal (first known as Baviaanskloof). Unfortunately, he fell foul of the authorities and decided it would be better to leave the country. Schmidt also expressed disappointment that he had not been more successful with the "unstable Hottentots."¹²

Christians fall easy prey to discouragement and disappointment because they set their hopes high. It may be true that we are nearly always doing a little better than we think! That was certainly true for Schmidt. Almost fifty years after his departure three Moravian messengers returned to the Genadendal area where they found "Mother" Lena, the last survivor of Schmidt's baptized firstfruits still teaching the same old Bible stories she had learned from him. It was Christmas Eve when the three met her. Her joy at their arrival was boundless. Carefully she pulled a New Testament from a leather bag and unwrapped it from its sheepskin cover. Her eyes were too weak to read, so she gave the book to a young woman who had learned to read from one of the other converts and asked her to read aloud the story of the wise men coming from the east. So much for the Khoi being too depraved for the Christian gospel to find root in them!¹³

Missionary activity increased toward the end of the Dutch East India Company's control of the Cape and grew quickly after the second British occupation in the early nineteenth century. The London Missionary Society rapidly spread its work eastward, and the Wesleyans and Glasgow Missionary Society soon followed it. Many of these missionaries felt a deep social concern. The conditions in which the indigenous people lived horrified these godly people. The slave trade was under threat throughout the British Empire, with evangelical Christians leading the way in Britain. John Philip and other missionaries made themselves bitterly unpopular through their long struggle on behalf of the Khoikhoi and colored people (those of mixed race), culminating in the passing in 1828 of Ordinance 50, which placed every free inhabitant in the Cape Colony on a level in the eye of the law so that each could enjoy personal freedom and security of property.

Despite their concern for social justice, these missionaries still did not respect local customs or spirituality. Monica Wilson makes this assessment:

But the missionaries were mostly from Britain, and they were Victorians imbued with the conviction of the value of their whole manner of

¹²Eric A. Walker, *A History of Southern Africa* (London: Longmans, 1957), 93.

¹³See Bernhard Krüger, *The Pear Tree Blossoms: The History of the Moravian Mission Stations in South Africa, 1737-1869* (Genadendal: Moravian Book Depot, 1966).

life—a conviction matched since 1918 only by Communists—and they pressed all sorts of peripheral changes which later generations have questioned. Not only did they preach the Protestant doctrine of work, but they expected their converts to wear a Western style of clothing; to build square houses rather than round ones; to settle in a village round the church rather than in scattered homesteads; to change the division of labour between men and women; and to abandon ancient festivals which were judged by whites to be lewd.¹⁴

We may believe that their disregard of indigenous spirituality was misguided, but we may never question the sincerity of their conviction. Monica Wilson comes to a very fair conclusion:

But the force compelling the Christian to action was religious conviction, not cultural chauvinism. The lives of men like van der Kemp, Robert Moffatt, Eugene Casalis, or James Stewart are not intelligible on any other hypothesis. 'The story of the missionary movements can record countless missionaries who were resented as bringing with them an alien and uncongenial culture. Not infrequently this led to their suffering violence. Often they were in fact "offered". But their own self-offering was not in the name of their culture. It was in the name of Him who had died for them'.¹⁵

David Livingstone was utterly convinced that if he could open up Africa to Christianity, civilization, and commerce it would heal the "open sore" that the iniquitous slave trade caused. Later generations respected his integrity and sincerity. Where such things are scarce, there is a tarred road to the place where his heart is buried, and, while many names have been changed in post-colonial Africa, the town in Zambia that was given his name still retains it.

IV. A CHANGE OF APPROACH

In 1864 Samuel Ajayi Crowther was consecrated as the first African bishop of the Anglican Church in West Africa. Despite concerted opposition from some missionaries, he pressed ahead, determined to indigenize the Christian faith so that Africans could accept Christianity without having to renounce their spiritual and cultural values.

About the same time a controversy was brewing in Natal, a British colony in southern Africa. John William Colenso was a controversial appointment as

¹⁴In *The Oxford History of South Africa*, ed. Monica Wilson and Leonard Thompson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), 1:266.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 1:267–8.

Natal's first Anglican bishop. He had been an arithmetician whose textbooks would remain in use many years after his death. Colenso began to question certain prevailing methods and results of biblical interpretation. He chose to tell the world that his decision to reexamine the Bible resulted from a question that his Zulu assistant, William Ngidi, asked him about the validity of the story of Noah's ark. That question only served to focus Colenso's attention on matters that had been exercising his mind for some time as he went about the work of translating and teaching the Bible. When he told this story in 1862 he became the butt of many jokes from his opponents—his critics depicted him as the buffoon who had been sent to convert the heathen only to be converted by them.

It might have been one thing for a heathen to question the veracity of the Bible, it was certainly quite another for him to denigrate its morality. William Ngidi was helping the bishop translate Exodus 21:20, 21: "If a man smite his servant, or his maid, with a rod, and he die under his hand, he shall be surely punished. Notwithstanding, if he continue a day or two, he shall not be punished: *for he is his money*." Colenso told of his Zulu assistant's reaction to that injunction:

I shall never forget the revulsion of feeling, with which a very intelligent Christian native, with whose help I was translating these words into the Zulu tongue, first heard them as words said to be uttered by the same great and gracious Being whom I was teaching him to trust in and adore. His whole soul revolted against the notion, the Great and Blessed God, the Merciful Father of all mankind, would speak of a servant or a maid as mere 'money' and allow a horrible crime to go unpunished, because the victim of the brutal usage had survived a few hours. My own heart and conscience at the time fully sympathised with his.¹⁶

Ngidi found the Bible not only hard to believe in parts, but he also judged it as bloody, immoral, and presenting a God whose nature was inferior to what he had been worshipping.

Colenso's new positions, arising, in part, from Ngidi's searching questions, led to huge controversy. Archbishop Grey of Cape Town tried Colenso for heresy. He was found guilty and deposed. Later, he won an appeal to the Privy Council and was reinstated.

The literal interpretation of the Bible then in vogue had not only forced Colenso to seek new methods of biblical criticism, but it had also brought

¹⁶Quoted in Jeff Guy, *The Heretic: A Study of the Life of John William Colenso, 1814-1883* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1983), 101.

great difficulties to the success of the missionary endeavor. Colenso strove to be intellectually and spiritually honest. He perceived clearly that the attitude of the authorities and the colonists did little to encourage the spread of Christianity among the Zulu people. They claimed to come from a superior Christian civilization yet proved to be patronizing, offensive, and downright dishonest.

This was brought to a head in the events surrounding the Zulu War of 1879. The Zulu king, Cetshwayo, did not want war, but the British authorities were determined to force him into it. After a series of intrigues and lies, they forced on the Zulus an ultimatum impossible to accept. After the deadline had expired, Lord Chelmsford led his troops from Natal across the Buffalo River into the Zulu Kingdom. Almost at once they suffered the most humiliating defeat in British military history up to that time. The Zulu army annihilated the headquarters column at Isandlwana, leaving dead some nine hundred white troops and an equal number of black levies. Later the same day, the Zulus attacked a small group of Welsh Fusiliers at Rorke's Drift and were repulsed—more Victoria Crosses were won in this single conflict than on any other day in British history.

The little colony of Natal was in a state of near panic. The Governor declared a "Day of Humiliation," "to confess our sins and ask for victory." Colenso had the opportunity to gather the settlers' support. A few well-chosen words against the heathen and all would have been forgiven and forgotten. Instead, this courageous man ripped into the congregation, telling them that they had not behaved as people who belonged to Christ in their dealings with the pagans. Claiming to represent a superior Christian civilization, they had not acted justly, loved mercy, nor walked humbly before their God.

V. TAKING AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY SERIOUSLY

The Bishops Crowther and Colenso were in the vanguard of those who realized that a spirituality existed among the people living in sub-Saharan Africa prior to the arrival of the western colonial powers. It would no longer be possible to denigrate the spirituality of the indigenous people, but ways had to be found once again to contextualize the Christian faith. It is interesting to note, in passing, the story of the conversion through the ministry of one Herbert George Brand of the grandfather of Kosuke Koyama, the noted Japanese theologian:

One of the few things I heard and still remember from my grandfather about his conversion to Christianity from Buddhism was that he was

impressed by this man who was able to say that Jesus Christ is Lord without ever making derogatory comments upon Japanese culture or Buddhism. 'That made me to follow Christ!' he told me.¹⁷

In the wake of the attack on African indigenous religion and customs many separatist sects came into being, such as the syncretistic Zionist Church, which Ignatius Lekhanyane founded in South Africa and which soon spread to Zimbabwe and Botswana. So popular is this sect that at Easter some two million of its followers gather at their headquarters at Moria in the Northern Province of South Africa.

Syncretism is a danger, but it is not the only possible approach to this problem. John Mbiti of Kenya points us to the way forward: "The strength and uniqueness of Christianity do not lie in the fact that its teachings, practice, and history have all the major elements of the other religious traditions. . . . The uniqueness of Christianity is Jesus Christ. . . . It is He . . . and He alone, who deserves to be the goal for individuals and mankind."¹⁸ As we examine the spirituality of Africa, we apply the same approach. We do not accept what is there indiscriminately. We look for what is Christlike. As Desmond Tutu quite rightly claims: "African theologians have set about demonstrating that the African religious experience and heritage were not illusory and that they should have formed the vehicle for conveying the Gospel verities to Africa."¹⁹

Hear also how Kosuke Koyama speaks of his spiritual journey:

When I came to Mount Calvary I brought my Japanese language, culture, and psychology to Jesus Christ. No matter what I do, 'Prince Shotoku' is within me, just as Moses is found in every Jew. It is true that I moved from a polytheistic, cosmological world (fertile nature orientation) to a monotheistic, eschatological world (critical time orientation), and from a relaxed culture to a tense culture. Yet there are elements of the polytheistic cosmological world, the cyclical relaxed culture, which are too rich and precious to be lightly discarded, and which can make very significant and positive contributions to the Christian faith, such as loyalty, filial piety to lord and community, and self-negation. The worlds of Moses and of Prince Shotoku are different,

¹⁷Kosuke Koyama, *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai: A Critique of Idols* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), 15-6.

¹⁸Quoted in Bediako, "Roots of African Theology," 60.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 59.

but there is a Christian possibility for a creative two-way traffic between them.²⁰

What he regards as too rich and precious to be discarded are Christlike qualities existing in the old faith. Christ goes before us in other faiths, often in no faith, and in the world. We need to identify his presence and work together with anyone who sincerely and faithfully seeks what Christ calls the kingdom of God and its righteousness.

VI. THE SOUTH AFRICAN MIRACLE

Come back with me to the South African situation. Let us try to identify what happened and then try to make some preliminary theological judgments about it.

The events leading up to the first "one man, one vote" election in South Africa, the elections themselves, and the immediate aftermath (some five years at least) have been described, even by those who never darken the doorways of any religious building, as miraculous. It is true that a low-grade civil war was being waged in the country, but it seemed to have little chance of success. The ruling power was immensely strong with huge resources. It seemed that it would take an enormous loss of life to bring change, perhaps a full-scale war with devastating effects. Yet, in South Africa, probably for the first time in history, a totalitarian government allowed itself to be voted out of office. (Contrast this with what has happened only recently in Yugoslavia.)

How did it happen? The drama had plenty of room for bit players, but there were three, maybe four, major actors. Three had very clear links to both African spirituality and Christianity: Mangosuthu Buthelezi is a Zulu and an Episcopalian, Nelson Mandela is a Xhosa and a Methodist, but there was also a mysterious Kenyan who had met Dr. Buthelezi in Washington at a prayer breakfast (or maybe at more than one) and who played a pivotal role in the story.

The fourth leading player in the drama does deserve mention—he was the State-President of South Africa, F. W. de Klerk. Cynics, who make their judgments quickly without allowing facts to cloud the issue, claim that he capitulated, not because of any moral sense, but because he could see the writing clearly on the wall. They claim that he acted against his own character and inclination. They may be correct, but there may also be another side. I had a long and sometimes acrimonious meeting with Mr. de Klerk in 1985, when he was Minister of Home Affairs. P. W. Botha was then firmly

²⁰Koyama, *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai*, 6–7.

entrenched as head of state, and, even if Botha were to relinquish office, there were still many other pretenders ahead of Mr. de Klerk. In other words, at that time he did not have a whisper of holding the highest political office in the land.

As our debate developed he proceeded to lay out a series of proposals that left the General Secretary of the Presbyterian Church and myself speechless. All I could manage was the comment that if what he proposed transpired it would leave the official opposition redundant! From the time Mr. de Klerk became State-President events proceeded as he told us, maybe not perfectly in order, but close enough to leave me quite unsurprised at each new development.

Mr. de Klerk is not a member of the largest and most powerful Afrikaans-speaking denomination in South Africa—the Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK)—but of a smaller splinter denomination that saw the light of day in the South African Republic (later known as the Transvaal after the Boer War)—Die Gereformeerde Kerk, or Doppers. The most famous Dopper was Paul Kruger, the President of the South African Republic at the outbreak of war in the twentieth century.

The Boers (settlers of Dutch stock) moved away from the Cape, from about 1838, to escape British rule. They moved through rugged territory into what later became known as the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. They were largely simple people with simple needs. They owned few possessions and few books, except the Bible. They took their faith with them into the unknown new country, but its hard, rugged nature also shaped their culture and their faith. It was not surprising that many of them could not cope with what they perceived to be the effete liberalism coming from the parent church in the Cape. The split came eventually. Although the new denomination was much influenced by ministers from the Netherlands, nevertheless it stuck to a conservative, earthy style with a strict morality. Their European Christianity had been shaped by the rugged soil of Africa. I have many family members who belong to this denomination. They do not tolerate grayness. Issues are purely black or white, and once convinced of the correctness of a course of action, they are not easily deterred.

The NGK had become the sacral pillar of apartheid's temple, giving theological credence to the government's ideology. Apart from a few giant souls like Beyers Naude, its ministers, on the whole, traveled the pietistic route not dissimilar to much of Lutheranism during the Second World War. That denomination was not likely to provide much moral leadership. A man from outside the establishment could. President de Klerk, like most of us, probably had mixed motives, but one of them could have been that he had

become convinced apartheid was morally and Christianly indefensible and therefore had to be ended.

Mangosuthu Buthelezi, the leader of the Inkatha Freedom Party (largely a Zulu organization representing perhaps as many as eight million people) had painted himself into a corner. It is said that he wanted to be part of the election process, but there was no possibility of his reentering it without losing face. If Inkatha were not part of the election, then the prospect for continuing violence was high. Desperate measures were necessary. Henry Kissinger and Lord Carrington, renowned for their ability in negotiation, came to the country. They lasted only twenty-four hours before they left, admitting defeat.

The delegates wended their disappointed way home after that meeting, convinced that further conflict was inevitable. At the meeting, however, was a Kenyan, Washington Okumu. He had met Dr. Buthelezi at prayer breakfasts in Washington, DC. He was convinced that there was a solution. All the participants were Christian people, who ought to know how to live together in love. They were Africans, and he believed that Christianity made an agreement a necessity and that an African method would make it possible. He telephoned the Inkatha leader and arranged to meet him the following morning at Lanseria Airport, a little north of Johannesburg, before he flew home to Ulundi, the capital of Kwa-Zulu.

For one reason or another, Washington Okumu was late, arriving at the airport as Dr. Buthelezi's private jet disappeared into the blue. Once again, the process seemed doomed. A few minutes later the aircraft developed engine trouble and returned to Lanseria. The two men met. They found a way to allow Dr. Buthelezi back into the election without any loss of face. The Anglo-American Corporation put an aircraft at his disposal to fly to Cape Town to meet with Nelson Mandela. Mr. Murray Hofmeyr, the chairperson of the business initiative helping to make the elections possible, had left the meeting the previous evening and gone to his seaside retreat. He received an urgent message to find his way to Cape Town, which he did. When all the main players had gathered in the Mother City, the new proposals were presented to Mr. Mandela, who telephoned some of his advisers and together they agreed to the plan that had been made. The Inkatha Freedom Party was on the ballot sheet at the very last minute.

The elections took place, against all the predictions, in a carnival atmosphere. The new government was elected and the Government of National Unity took office peacefully on the appointed day. Something new had come out of Africa—a totalitarian government had allowed itself to be voted out of

office and had accepted the new government, which gave some of the cabinet ministers of the previous regime positions in the transition.

One of the early actions of the new government was to establish a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to try to deal with the pain and the anger felt by so many. It gave those who had committed some dreadful deeds an opportunity to confess publicly and, once the truth was known, for forgiveness and amnesty to be granted. It was a painful process with many flaws, but it had profound effects. One of the consequence of these events has been the use of Nelson Mandela as a statesman to try to bring reconciliation in many parts of the world where conflict has been brutal and dehumanizing. Dr. Alex Boraine, a vice-chairman of the Commission, said in a radio program recently that he had received a number of telephone calls requesting help in fraught situations, especially to advise on the establishment of a truth and reconciliation process in the Balkans and Northern Ireland.

VII. THE PHILOSOPHY OF UBUNTU

The South African situation is very far from perfect. Violent crime happens all too frequently. Corruption in government and business is rife. But we need to exercise caution in looking at only the distaff side. There are many counterexamples of the success of the new dispensation. Most South Africans would testify that the transition of their society from a totalitarian state to a multiparty democracy is not merely the result of the intriguing machinations of politicians. The commitment to peaceful coexistence among ordinary South Africans, despite their many differences, was also crucial. Sisho Maphisa says, "South Africans are slowly rediscovering their common humanity. Gone are the days when people were stripped of their dignity through harsh laws. I suggest that the transformation of an apartheid South Africa into a democracy is a re-discovery of *ubuntu*."²¹ According to Joe Teffo from the Ubuntu School of Philosophy in Pretoria: "The ethos of *ubuntu* . . . is one single gift that African philosophy can bequeath on other philosophies of the world." Ubuntu is extremely difficult to define in abstract terms. It means humanness, morality, honesty, concern for the well-being of others. It is summed up in the Zulu maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*—"a person is a person through other persons," or in another definition: "A human being is a human being through (the otherness of) other human beings."

The understanding of who "persons" are extends to the ancestors. In an African ritual involving beer drinking, more often than not some of the beer

²¹*Man in Constant Search of Ubuntu: A Dramatist's Obsession* (Pretoria: Ubuntu School of Philosophy, 1994), 8.

is first poured onto the ground for the ancestors. Ian Player, founder of the Wilderness Leadership School, tells how his extraordinary Zulu ranger, Magqubu Ntombela, made the long pilgrimage from Zululand to the hospital in Durban where his father had died. He asked to be taken to the bed and slowly passed a branch from a buffalo thorn tree down the bed from top to bottom, capturing the soul of his father. He then took a bus back into town and paid for two passengers. He caught the train for Zululand carrying carefully the precious buffalo thorn branch, once again purchasing two tickets for the journey—he was taking his father home!

Ubuntu also embraces the natural world. Another story involving Magqubu Ntombela concerns a care for animals:

(After the royalty) other people were permitted to eat (the sweet berries), but we always left some for the baboons. In times of great drought we all suffered because of water and food, and we would take maize from our granaries, which as you know are under the ground in the cattle kraal. Yes, we took the mielies (corn on the cob) and spread them out on the ground beyond the fields so that our brothers (the baboons) could eat too!²²

This may give the gist of the term, but as the first black woman appointed a judge of South Africa's Constitutional Court, Yvonne Mokgoro, said, "It is one of those things that you know when you see it!" My church recently employed a Zulu-speaking receptionist, Lindiwe Mthembu. I asked her what *ubuntu* means. She replied, "Remember the Saturday afternoon I came to the church looking for work. You were sitting on the grass next to the fountain. You did not know me. You listened to my story. Then you gave me money for my rent and asked me to be back on Monday. You had never seen me before, but you trusted me to be back on Monday—that's *ubuntu*."

Community is vital, then, for African spirituality—a community of the living, the ancestors, and the natural order. Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche Community for the mentally handicapped and their helpers, made this observation:

When I visit African villages, I realize that through their rituals and traditions they are deeply living community life. Each person has a sense of belonging to the others; men of the same ethnic origin or village are truly brothers. I remember Mgr. Agre, Bishop of Man, meeting a customs officer at Abidjan airport; they embraced like

²²Ian Player, *Zululand Wilderness: Shadow and Soul* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1997), 90.

brothers because they came from the same village, they belonged to each other in some way. Most Africans do not need to talk about community. They live it intensely.²³

Because *ubuntu* takes "the other" seriously, consensus is vital. Traditional African culture displays an extraordinary patience in searching for consensus. Democracy cannot be reduced to majority rule. Although there may well be a hierarchy of importance, nevertheless every person gets an equal chance to speak up until some kind of group cohesion is reached. The speaker will speak even if he or she is totally in agreement with what had been said before—it is not enough to vote at the appropriate time. This method of *indaba* (conference) drives whites crazy!

Ubuntu arises out of a scarcity of resources, so it is not surprising that it lays great store in family relationships and the pooling of community resources. In South Africa there are approximately 800,000 *stokvels*, joint undertakings such as savings clubs, burial societies, and other types of cooperatives. These have been variously described as capitalism with humanness, or a socialist form of capitalism. Always allowing for original sin, these groups do not exploit their members. It is important to make a profit, which is then shared on an equal basis. This could quite easily be seen as an extended family system.

VIII. UBUNTU AND CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY MEET

We live during the in-between time, in which every act of self-sacrificial love, every decision or action that leads to harmony between people, is a brick in the building of the kingdom of God. No human action will be absolutely pure. Human motives will always be mixed. All we shall ever hope to achieve is one more faltering step along the way. I owe to Ernest Campbell the insight that no victory in the ethical and moral field is ever permanently won—it has to be continually defended.

Nevertheless, in one brief moment the practical spirituality of Africa, the spirit of *ubuntu*, and the values of the kingdom of God met in South Africa and a new dispensation came into being. People who had wielded almost total power for decades relinquished it peaceably. Others who had been terribly persecuted seldom sought revenge and displayed amazingly little bitterness. The "Rainbow Nation," comprising a majority of Christian people (the extraordinary fact of the South African Communist Party is that seventy percent of its members are also members of churches) took its first faltering

²³*Community and Growth* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979), 6.

footsteps forward, giving to the world the hope that other peoples in conflict can achieve something similar.

Something new and good has come out of Africa. If Dr. Berger is correct that "Africa is our time machine to the future[, f]or what is happening in Africa today is a signpost for the future of the world," then all will be watching in fear and trembling how this develops, because it brings hope to a weary and conflicted world.²⁴

*God bless Africa, guard her children,
guide her leaders, and give her peace.*

²⁴Berger, *Footsteps of Eve*, 308.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Moorhead, James H. *World without End: Mainstream American Protestant Visions of the Last Things, 1880-1925*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999. Pp. 241. \$29.95.

Early in his career James H. Moorhead published a fine study that explored Northern Protestant visions of the "last things" during the Civil War. Since writing that book he has been recognized as an authority on apocalypticism and millenarianism in American culture, especially as they have been manifested among religious groups, including denominations and traditional bodies. Now, after several decades as professor of American Church History at Princeton Theological Seminary, he has returned to the subject of apocalyptic thought in American Protestantism. While this study is centered in the decades spanning the turn of the last century, it effectively frames and delineates the topic from late colonial days to its checkered present at the turn of our new century.

The period of years central to this study was tumultuous for America. It included sustained immigration, erratic expansion of the economy and society, industrial transformation and development, revolution in systems of transportation, urban—and suburban—expansion, external military ventures, internal political struggles, an initial engagement with Europe, and finally a postwar boom. No less was the intellectual world unsettled. Religiously, too, dramatic challenge and change affected the Catholic community (which solidified its internal structure), while a much smaller Jewish community wrestled with internal diversification. For its part, Protestantism in its complexity combined and divided. The great strength of this new study is that it charts the development of thinking about "last things" within mainstream Protestantism against such a turbulent background without permitting the foreground to slip out of focus.

The most noteworthy aspects of *World without End* are its evenhandedness and its sustained attention to theological reflection as the means widely used by religious folk to make the experienced world intelligible. For the first, Moorhead moves among the views of many individuals and ranges across several centuries without resorting to invidious or belittling comments. He shows respect for a wide array of views among his subjects and avoids the judgmental stance that is commonplace in discussion of this particular cluster of ideas. For the second, he resists a typical impulse that approaches thought about, or imagery of, the "last things" as secondary to a more basic viewpoint or process—such as evolution or industrial capitalism. The result is an

appreciative view of religious belief and associated behaviors that is a healthy corrective to various intellectually reductive programs as well as to hyper-dogmatic theology.

Of course, a great irony underlies this larger subject, one about which the author is clearly conscious. Across these decades, many mainstream Protestants became more responsive to—indeed, engaged with—the modern world taking shape around them. As a consequence they increasingly “literalized” their eschatological commitments into this-worldly expectations. This had the effect, largely unintended it would seem, of seriously reducing if not eliminating any possibility of appreciating the importance of a sense for transcendence of the current world. So not only did much of mainstream Protestantism lose attachment to arcane eschatological formulations, it lost the capability of responding with awe and wonder to a world still commanding respect for its majesty and mystery. The ensuing deep division within American Protestantism—usually cast as a liberal/reactionary divide—has held it captive for the twentieth century. Whether a middle ground can regain pan-Protestant allegiance is one of the genuinely interesting questions about the new century we have now entered. *World without End* ought to stimulate salutary reflection within churches and denominations as they look to the future, as it surely will receive appreciative reviews from scholars for whom doctrines of the “last things” prove to have continuing fascination.

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Olson, Dennis T. “The Book of Judges: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflection.” Pages 723–888 in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*. Vol. 2, *Numbers, Deuteronomy, Introduction to Narrative Literature, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1998. Pp. 1388. \$70.00.

The word that I am receiving from pastors and church educators is that *The New Interpreter’s Bible* is proving to be immensely helpful in their preparation for preaching and teaching. Dennis Olson’s work on Judges is no exception. Olson is a well-informed, careful, and creative exegete; his reflections are consistently insightful and evocative.

As Olson quite rightly points out, the book of Judges has recently served as something of a testing ground for newer approaches to biblical interpretation. It is evident that Olson is intimately familiar with this new array of “criticisms”—narrative/rhetorical, redactional, social-scientific, feminist, structuralist, deconstructive, ideological, and more. But, as he points out in the introduction, his “commentary has a general tilt toward redactional and

narrative analysis of the final form of the text, along with an overriding theological interest in the questions, issues, and struggles raised by the text for understanding the relationships of God, humans, and the world."

It is precisely Olson's "overriding theological interest" that makes his work so valuable for pastors, thus fulfilling *The New Interpreter's Bible's* primary goal—"to bring the best in contemporary biblical scholarship into the service of the church to enhance preaching, teaching, and study of the Scriptures." In particular, Olson clearly identifies and devotes constant attention and analysis to themes in "dialogical tension" in the book of Judges, the most pervasive and important of which is explicitly theological—namely, "the interplay of God's justice or punishment and God's mercy or compassion."

As Olson points out, this explicitly theological tension is evident in the pattern that is first outlined in 2:11–19 and that recurs in the story of each judge. The pattern, however, is not simply repetitive. Rather, as Olson demonstrates, it is modified as the book proceeds to communicate a progressive deterioration that is reinforced by the stories of the individual judges, who, beginning with Gideon, become increasingly less faithful and less effective.

Olson points out too how this progressive deterioration is highlighted by other features of the book of Judges, notably the portrayal of women. Whereas women are honored and take initiative in the early chapters of the book of Judges (Achsah in Chapter 1, Deborah and Jael in Chapters 4–5), they become marginalized and abused as the book proceeds (Jephthah's daughter in Chapter 11, the Levite's concubine in Chapter 19). The movement of progressive deterioration reaches its lowest point in Chapters 17–21, where the pattern has disappeared and things completely disintegrate.

As Olson observes, "God has allowed Israel to experience the violent harvest of its long history of disobedience." This observation, of course, provides a helpful perspective on one pole of the book's fundamental "dialogical tension"—divine justice or punishment. But, according to Olson, what is more striking as the book ends is the other pole of the book's basic tension—divine mercy or compassion. The faithful God simply will not give up on the horribly faithless people.

As Olson recognizes, the portrayal of God's astounding mercy encourages readers of the book of Judges to reflect on our relationship to this God: "The book of Judges invites us to assess our own times and communities and modes of leadership. Are they effective and faithful instruments for promoting the will and purposes of God in the world? Are we sufficiently open to the new futures and possibilities God is creating out of the chaos and churning of our own time?" These are precisely the questions that faithful teachers and

pastors should be holding up before themselves and their congregations. Thus, Olson performs the extremely valuable service of teaching us that the book of Judges is finally as much about us and our world as it is about ancient Israel.

J. Clinton McCann
Eden Theological Seminary

Sakenfeld, Katharine Doob. *Ruth*. Louisville: John Knox, 1999. Pp. 91. \$21.95.

In addition to the "expository essays" that are an integral part of the Interpretation Bible commentary series format, Sakenfeld's commentary on Ruth contains a brief introduction, a very brief "Hermeneutical and Theological Postscript," and a bibliography including suggestions "for further study" as well as "literature cited."

The introduction states the perspective taken in the commentary and discusses the usual critical issues (date and purpose, authorship, traditions and customs underlying the story, canonical context, and theological themes). While it is Sakenfeld's stated intention to give "explicit attention to alternative interpretations," she does make her own understandings of the basic interpretive issues clear. She dates the received Hebrew text "no earlier than the late pre-exilic period" and understands the purpose of the book to be "instruction concerning the community's view of outsiders . . . legitimizing an inclusive attitude towards foreigners, perhaps especially towards foreign women." She thinks that the story portrays "a microcosm of the peaceable kingdom envisioned by the prophetic tradition," that it gives "examples or models of ways of human interaction that foster the coming into being of such community," and that it shows God to be "at work through the everyday actions of faithful people."

The commentary proper is divided into four parts (corresponding to the four chapters in the book of Ruth). Each section builds towards what Sakenfeld sees as "the central motif of the story as a whole, namely, human protection and support as a manifestation of God's redemptive care." In this reviewer's opinion, the most important parts of the commentary are those in which Sakenfeld highlights various details in the story which should *not* be read as prescriptions for our own behavior. For instance, Sakenfeld notes the unfortunate fact that "Ruth's commitment to Naomi" has been used in some contexts "to exhort all young women to sacrifice everything for their mothers-in-law." While Sakenfeld supports the idea that "the loyalty of Ruth to Naomi may offer a general model for loyal relationships between all people,"

she cautions the reader against "generalizing Ruth's words to her mother-in-law as a desirable model for all women." In a similar way Sakenfeld points out that while "the narrator's portrait of Bethlehem in the concluding scenes in chapter 4 offers a vision of a harmonious and joyful community," this picture was never meant to be read as "a prescription for how that community ought always to be organized."

The concluding "Hermeneutical and Theological Postscript" attempts to resolve these and similar interpretive issues that arise when a reader sees "so many human inadequacies in the presuppositions, the processes and the end result of the narrative." Sakenfeld very appropriately concludes that "the story of Ruth need not, indeed should not, be read as an endorsement of every aspect of its ending as the desire of God for all times and places." Rather, she suggests that the reader of Ruth needs to try "looking beyond the specific social structures to their underlying principles, much as one may interpret biblical legal material theologically by looking beyond the specific case laws."

Kathleen A. Farmer
United Theological Seminary

Seow, Choon-Leong. "The First and Second Books of Kings: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflection." Pages 3-295 in *The New Interpreter's Bible*. Vol. 3, *1&2 Kings, 1&2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Tobit, Judith*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1999. Pp. 1193. \$70.00.

Writing a helpful and practical commentary is a matter of keeping one's sense of balance. Details necessary to guide interpretation are necessary but must not overwhelm or disorient the reader. Larger patterns need to be highlighted, without silencing the particularities of individual texts. One must advance clear opinions without showing disrespect for alternative possibilities. To be useful in church and synagogue, a commentary needs to be theologically sensitive without being partisan. Choon-Leong Seow has managed this balancing act with dexterity in his contribution to *The New Interpreter's Bible*.

Certain features stand out. The commentary pays attention to both literary and historical issues. Seow provides appropriate references to parallels in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* and, in a limited way, to pertinent scholarly literature. He draws attention to intertextual references and to linguistic and text-critical features of importance to the interpreter. He provides alternative interpretive options when there are hotly contested issues. The material offered in his "Reflections" sections unmistakably grows out of the exposi-

tions set forth in the "Commentary" sections. The theological stance is clearly Christian, but not so dominantly so that it would make the commentary unusable for general academic or Jewish audiences. For Seow, *Kings* is a theological narrative presented in the format of a historical document.

One way to illustrate the character of this commentary is to focus on an individual section, the reign of Rehoboam (1 Kgs 14:21–31). Seow first sets this into an overview of the story of the first three Davidic kings of Judah, a narrative that advances hope "because of the dual election of Jerusalem and David." In the "Commentary" section he points out that the narrator's real interest in Rehoboam is as a foil for Jeroboam. Rehoboam's Ammonite mother is a signal of his apostasy. Seow explains the cult objects involved with reference to the strictures of Deuteronomy. *Kings* implies that Shishak's invasion and its consequences were the result of this disloyalty, yet "the house of Rehoboam survives, despite the chastisement." A text-critical note explains the variant names of his successor (Abijam/Abijah) and points out the equivalence of the Abijah alternative to the name of the short-lived son of Jeroboam. After the careers of the next two kings are covered, the "Reflections" section muses on the contrast in fate between the kings of Judah and Israel and on the character of a "sovereign God who . . . mysteriously saves without regard for one's character."

Richard D. Nelson
Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg

Pleins, J. David. *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible: A Theological Introduction*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000. Pp. 592. \$39.95.

J. David Pleins of Santa Clara University has written a compelling, quite distinctive introduction to the Hebrew Bible. As a student of George Mendenhall, his particular focus on sociopolitical issues and sociological methods exhibits great competence, keeping questions of social justice central. The first name mentioned in the book is Walter Rauschenbusch, great voice of social justice, with his haunting question about the connection between "the petty politics of the Semitic tribes" and "the great capitalist republic of the West." The book opens, moreover, with a case study of Jer 22:13–19, around which cluster a galaxy of names in social interpretation, including Max Weber, Antonin Causse, Louis Wallis, Peter Berger, and Bruce Malina. The reader is immediately on notice that this is no conventional, "neutral" introduction; the passion of presentation evokes the reader to engagement with serious contemporary issues and with critical data shown to be closely germane to those issues.

The body of the book is organized around four themes: law, narrative, prophets, and, finally, poetry and wisdom. Law is understood as a process of creating "a principled society." The covenant code aims at "protecting the disenfranchised." Deuteronomy is a developing tradition of "legal ethics," and the priestly materials offer a "bold social program." Pleins here, as everywhere in the volume, has done his homework and offers the reader a complete documentation and bibliography. What marks the discussion, however, is the framing of law in terms of the formation of a society in an intentional and sustained way.

The long discussion of narrative includes the "Grand Narratives" of Genesis-Kings and the Chronicles. The section concludes with reflection on the narratives of Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Ruth, and Daniel. Pleins is fully alert to the current questions of the "historicity" of the narrative traditions and draws the careful, balanced judgment that the Grand Narrative (Genesis-Kings) "illuminates for us the ideological disputes and conflicting social values of the monarchic period as they are taken up and recast by the exilic community." The balance he stakes out concerning traditional rootage and subsequent ideological utilization nicely avoids the extremes now so tempting in the field.

The most striking element in this discussion is that Pleins's pondering of the Exodus narrative includes a quite extended reflection on the liberation trajectory of Gustavo Gutiérrez, together with an important addendum on liberation interpretation in a Palestinian context with reference to the work of Naim Ateek. Pleins is fully conversant with these issues and knows how to move through and beyond traditional critical questions to the sorts of contemporary interpretive issues most often absent in introductory presentations.

The discussion of the prophets offers four extended chapters in turn on Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and The Twelve. The discussion is fully familiar with critical issues and pays close attention to both social location and canonical development. In the chapter on poetry and wisdom, attention is paid to "poetic imagination." The most extended and, in this reviewer's judgment, helpful discussion is on poverty in Proverbs, a theme on which Pleins has previously published.

This book is a rich and full presentation of great sensitivity and considerable depth. It is not "introductory" in the sense of being simple or easily accessible. Indeed, it will require a good teacher to help beginning students into and through the book. But it will be worth the effort, for readers will be pushed quickly into weighty materials that justify the subtitle "A Theological Introduction." What I like most is that students will encounter in this work

an author who cares, who invites engagement with his interpretive passions, and who eschews any "objective," detached presentation. The author is engaged in the issues, critical and ethical, and so, inescapably, will be his readers.

Walter Brueggemann
Columbia Theological Seminary

Limburg, James. *Psalms*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000. Pp. 509. \$29.95.

The Westminster Bible Companion series of commentaries attempts "to help the laity of the church read the Bible more clearly and intelligently." It assumes that "[t]he scriptures are clear and clearly available to everyone as they call us to faith in the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ and as they offer to every human being the word of salvation." In this volume on Psalms, James Limburg has succeeded admirably in communicating words of truth and hope in sensitive and culturally relevant ways. This is due in part to his own keen ears and eyes, attuned both to the scriptures and to contemporary society, and in part to the power and relevance of the scriptures themselves. The Psalms lend themselves to personal and corporate uses in any era much more easily than most Old Testament books, and Limburg has succeeded well in showing how this can be so.

Limburg's love for the Psalms and his intimate knowledge of them are evident on every page, yet he does not use the jargon of scholarship or burden his readers with its apparatus. For Limburg, scholarship serves the goal of understanding and appreciating the Bible; it is not displayed for its own sake. So, for example, he succinctly introduces the concept of lament in a mere six lines (in commenting on Psalm 13), and refers the reader back to that discussion many times later in the commentary. In simple, uncluttered prose he introduces readers to all the major types of psalms (praises, thanksgivings, laments, royal and wisdom psalms, and so on), to the use of the Psalms over the centuries, to the Psalter's nature as a collection, and much more.

Limburg's work is well-attuned to contemporary life and abounds with contemporary allusions and illustrations. Thus, we read about his attending a Jewish fall festival called *simchat torah* and learn how it pictures the ideas in Psalm 4; about Anne Frank's family in connection with Psalm 7; and about Elie Wiesel's struggle with the problem of evil—as well as verses from *Fiddler on the Roof*—in discussions of Psalms 13, 22, 44, and others. We are regularly referred to the words of classic Christian hymns, such as "What a Friend We

Have in Jesus" (Psalm 22), "This is My Father's World" (Psalm 47), and "Holy, Holy, Holy" (Psalm 98). We often read of anecdotes arising from Limburg's boyhood years in prairies of the Midwest and his years of teaching in the classroom or in the church. All of these features enrich this work.

Limburg writes self-consciously as a Christian, although he is certainly sensitive to Jewish concerns. He regularly refers to New Testament passages relating to the Psalms at hand, whether directly so or only as illustrations. Indeed, in discussing the royal Psalm 2, which refers directly to the Lord's king in Jerusalem but, in an eschatological sense, also to Jesus the Messiah, Limburg says that "[o]ne could write a book on the 'messiah' theme. In fact, it's been done. The church calls it the New Testament."

Limburg's work is an eminently warm and useful introduction to that most "human" of biblical books, where God's word encounters us mostly in the form of human words to and about God. I recommend it highly to laypeople, students, and pastors as a rich resource of practical insights.

David M. Howard Jr.
Bethel Theological Seminary

Brown, William P. *Ecclesiastes*. Louisville: John Knox, 2000. Pp. 143. \$21.95.

Throughout this commentary in the Interpretation series, William P. Brown, professor at Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, VA, makes a strong case for the relevance of Ecclesiastes to present-day Christians. He opens by nicely summarizing the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh* in a way that highlights elements of the story bearing resemblance to Qoheleth's own quest for meaning. References to these elements then appear throughout the commentary with insightful discussion regarding their relationship to particular texts from Ecclesiastes. On the whole, Brown's analysis serves to emphasize a shared concern throughout the ages for issues such as death, futility of life, joy, contentment, and the mysteriousness of the divine will. Perhaps it is because of Brown's emphasis on the "mythic," universal quality of Ecclesiastes that discussion of its historical situation does not feature prominently after the commentary's introduction. He explains that in Ecclesiastes the themes of *Gilgamesh* were "reinterpreted for a new age, an age of disillusionment," but this particular age is not discussed in detail.

Following the introduction, Brown works through the book according to an outline of textual units. Guided by the principle of allowing the whole of the book to interpret its parts, the result is an engaging, inviting commentary that moves smoothly through Ecclesiastes. Not only does Brown refer to

other parts of Ecclesiastes to illuminate particular texts within the book, but frequent references to other texts from both the Old and New Testaments are also included. In addition, he provides excellent illustrations of Qoheleth's thought by drawing on a wide variety of more recent literary and theological thinkers such as Shakespeare, Twain, Melville, Barth, Bonhoeffer, Dickens, Kierkegaard, Tillich, Saul Bellow, Barbara Kingsolver, and Kathleen Norris. These references greatly enhance Brown's discussion and provide a rich resource for those hoping to communicate Ecclesiastes to modern audiences. Furthermore, they underscore the point that certain elements of Ecclesiastes have indeed resonated throughout the ages and continue to have relevance today.

The concluding chapter, entitled "Qoheleth's Place in Christian Faith and Life," seeks to demonstrate the continuity between this book and the New Testament. The treatment of six themes (death, the purpose of history, gain and gift/joy and sorrow, work and vocation, knowledge of God, and knowledge of self) prompts reflection and might be used as the basis for a series of sermons or Bible studies on these topics. Instead of reading Qoheleth as a foil for Christian thought, as many have done, Brown argues that "it is very possible that James and Paul, if not the Gospel writers and Jesus himself, were steeped in the language and ethos of this canonical misfit," and he refers to numerous New Testament texts that share points of contact with Ecclesiastes.

Brown does well to emphasize these similarities, especially in the face of interpretations of Ecclesiastes as a deviation from the canonical norm and not useful for Christian appropriation. He devotes so much attention to the continuity, however, that the final chapter hardly addresses any aspects of Ecclesiastes that differ from other parts of the biblical witness and so gives the impression that conformity to other scripture, especially the New Testament, is what gives a book authority or value. Thus, the commentary moves toward mirroring Qoheleth's epilogue, which, according to Brown, "blunts the book's subversive edge in order to bring it into the biblical mainstream."

Brown might have developed more fully his statement that Ecclesiastes makes "an indispensable contribution by adding a richness to the scriptural witness not otherwise found in any book of the Bible" or explored further the dialogical quality he observes in Ecclesiastes. One way he might have done this is by continuing a wonderful analogy described in the introduction regarding the relationship of Ecclesiastes to more conventional wisdom literature. Music criticism, he explains, recognizes a basic continuity between different musical periods, even though the periods differ in style, form, and tonality. In relation to more classical wisdom, Qoheleth plays out like the

modern music of Stravinsky, which is characterized by harmonic desecration, and Brown points to specific ways this is heard in the text. Likewise, Brown's concluding chapter might have given more playing time to the notes in Ecclesiastes that sound different from the larger canon and to ways in which Christians might hear these notes without relegating them to the category of mere foil. As he points out, however, such "harmonic desecration" of Qoheleth has received much attention in scholarship, and he makes a noteworthy contribution by emphasizing the oft-overlooked similarities. For this and the other contributions mentioned above, this commentary will be quite helpful to the student of Ecclesiastes.

Jennifer S. Green
Princeton Theological Seminary

Theissen, Gerd. *The Religion of the Earliest Churches: Creating a Symbolic World*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999. Pp. 393. \$29.00.

A more precise rendering of the original German title indicates the nature of this ambitious work: *Eine Theorie der urchristlichen Religion* ("A Theory of the Earliest Christian Religion") suggests less an inductive study of what early Christians thought and did religiously, than an effort to place the available evidence within a theoretical understanding of the nature of religion. Theissen's interest in applying social-scientific methods (especially sociology and psychology) to the New Testament has been displayed in many earlier publications. The present volume represents a synthetic statement concerning the origin and consolidation of Christianity. Theissen uses the category of religion rather than theology to allow for "a view from inside and a view from outside—and above all to mediate between these two perspectives." The introduction ("The Programme of a Theory of Primitive Christian Religion") lays out his theoretical perspectives. Religion is understood as a "cultural sign language which promises a gain in life by corresponding to an ultimate reality," and is articulated by myth, ritual, and ethics. The functions of religion—how it gives a "gain in life"—are complex, addressing cognitive, emotional, and pragmatic human needs by variously ordering life, surmounting crises, and provoking crises. The basic problem for a theory of early Christian religion is showing its distinctiveness vis-à-vis Judaism.

In the first three parts of his exposition, Theissen examines respectively myth, ethics, and ritual. Under myth, he tries to show the dialectic between history and myth as played out in the figure of Jesus: the historical Jesus was himself enacting a mythic view of reality, and the attribution of divinity to the resurrected Jesus is a myth grounded in historical time. Under ethics,

Theissen examines two basic values, love and the renunciation of status, and applies these to the case of the disposition of possessions and concerns for wisdom and holiness. Under ritual, he traces the origin of Christian sacraments to the symbolic actions of John and Jesus and the link between the cessation of animal sacrifices and the sacrificial interpretation of the death of Jesus. The fourth major section of the book argues that the writing of the gospels represents the creation of an autonomous sign world, first in the Synoptics by shaping a coherent mythic grounding for the religion in the figure of Jesus, and decisively in the Gospel of John, where the distinctively Christian symbolism is both explicit and reflexive. The fifth major section deals with the challenges to this sign system presented respectively by the Judaistic, gnostic, and prophetic crises of the first two centuries and with its consolidation through the process of canon formation, which institutionalized the tension between diversity and unity. Theissen concludes with a summary of the process by which the Christian symbolic system was constructed and consolidated and with some reflections of a more theological character concerning the plausibility of that symbolic world.

Theissen's readers never go completely unrewarded. He is inventive, widely read, capable of stunning insights, and willing to extend the too often narrow boundaries of theological discourse. His perception of the decisive role played by the gospel narratives for shaping a Christian symbolic world that enabled and almost demanded a life separate from Judaism is a genuine contribution. But readers should also be aware that Theissen's love of theory sometimes leads to conclusions in which the desire for a neat pattern triumphs over an adequate examination of the evidence. His treatment of the sharing of possessions, for example, pays far more attention to "upper-class" and "lower-class" attitudes than it does to the complex issue of what early Christians actually did. Despite his sophisticated appreciation for the contributions of social science, Theissen's views concerning a range of critical New Testament issues remain relatively untouched by the best recent scholarship, especially concerning Paul. Finally, despite the claim of examining early Christianity as a religion, the entire study remains mainly at the level of ideas. The issue of fellowship (or unity) in the first generation, for example, involved a networking of persons, resources, and practices as much as it did shared values and concepts. Likewise, Theissen fails to acknowledge how the consolidation of Christian identity in the second century owed as much to apostolic succession and rule of faith as it did to canon.

Luke Timothy Johnson
Emory University

Charlesworth, James H. and Walter P. Weaver, eds. *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Christian Faith: In Celebration of the Jubilee Year of the Discovery of Qumran Cave 1*. Harrisburg: Trinity, 1998. Pp. 76. \$12.00.

This slim book is one of a series intended to explore "the boundaries where faith and academic study intersect" and to deal with scholarship's "challenging questions for traditional faith." Four scholars who have specialized in working with the Dead Sea Scrolls contribute to this collection of essays.

First, Joseph Fitzmyer deals with "General Methodological Considerations" regarding the light that the Dead Sea Scrolls can shed on Christian origins. He explains which of the Dead Sea Scrolls are relevant to this question, what they consist of, and the nature of their contribution to the understanding of Christianity. This is a useful introductory survey.

John Collins then presents "Ideas of Messianism in the Dead Sea Scrolls" and discusses three fragmentary texts that have recently caused considerable controversy: 4Q285, which has been held by some to speak of a dying messiah, but which is more likely to concern a descendant of David who kills his enemy; 4Q246, which refers to a figure who will be called "Son of God" and "Son of the Most High," and which bears interesting similarities to Luke 1:31-35—though whether Luke is in fact dependent on this passage, as Collins suggest, seems dubious; and 4Q521, which describes how either God or God's messiah will "heal the wounded, give life to the dead, and preach good news to the poor"—again reminiscent of Luke's portrait of Jesus. Collins suggests that Christian portrayals of Jesus were more "heavily dependent on Jewish expectations of the time" than had previously been supposed.

David Noel Freedman discusses "Prophecy in the Dead Sea Scrolls"—or rather, since there were no longer any authentic prophets at the time when the scrolls were being written, with the interpretation or recycling of prophecy. The commentaries found at Qumran provide what were regarded as the authoritative interpretations of the old prophecies, showing their relevance to the contemporary situation. The original historical setting of the prophecies was ignored, and they were understood as being fulfilled in the present. The sect's recycling of old texts, with the claim that its is the only true interpretation, is remarkably similar to what we find in the New Testament.

In the final essay, James Charlesworth attempts to deal more specifically with the questions raised by the Dead Sea Scrolls for Christian faith. Somewhat surprisingly, since he is one of the editors of the book, he goes over some of the ground already covered in the earlier chapters. One wonders, too, whether those who have read this far in the book will really be bothered by the suggestion that the Dead Sea Scrolls might destroy Christian faith.

The earlier chapters, however, are a useful indication for nonspecialists of the important light that the writings of one sectarian Jewish group—the Essenes at Qumran—can throw on another—the early Christians.

Morna D. Hooker

Robinson College, University of Cambridge

Charlesworth, James H. *Critical Reflections on the Odes of Solomon*. Vol. 1, *Literary Setting, Textual Studies, Gnosticism, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Gospel of John*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998. Pp. 303. \$85.00.

The *Odes of Solomon* are a collection of forty-two early Christians poems, to which reference is made in patristic literature. Their text was lost until a Coptic translation of five of them was identified in the gnostic writing *Pistis Sophia* and published in 1812. The Syriac text of *Odes Sol.* 2–42 was discovered by J. Rendel Harris and published in 1909, and the Greek text of *Ode Sol.* 11 was published in 1959.

These fascinating poems caught the imagination of James Charlesworth, and he discussed them in his Duke University doctoral dissertation of 1967 and published an edition of them in 1973. In the present volume Charlesworth brings together nine previously published studies and a chapter of his dissertation, all revised or rewritten, along with an annotated bibliography plus a summary of the present state of the study of the *Odes Sol.* There are also indexes of ancient texts and of authors.

Part 1 contains an introduction, an account of the chief questions at issue, and discussions of hymns and odes in early Judaism and early Christianity and of the original language of the *Odes Sol.* Charlesworth believes that “the Greek hypothesis is no longer tenable.” He favors the view that the original language was Aramaic, or perhaps a “very early” form of Syriac “as witnessed, for example, in the so-called Old Syriac inscriptions.”

Part 2, “Textual Studies,” has chapters on paronomasia, assonance, and a problem in *Ode Sol.* 16:8, preceded by a chapter on *bāʾnāʾ* in earliest Christianity. This noun normally means “request” or the like in Syriac, but C. C. Torrey pointed out that it is used in the Sinaitic Syriac to translate *paraklēsis*, “consolation,” in Luke 2:25 and 6:24. Torrey suggested that there it does not come from a root meaning “to seek or pray” but from a Western Aramaic root *būaʿ*, “to rejoice.” Charlesworth argues that the word makes sense in *Ode Sol.* 17:13 only if it means “consolation” (with the connotation “resurrection” in Christian thought). The suggestion is plausible, though it is arguable that the relevant line means “and my prayer was in my love” and refers to Christ’s intercession for his followers.

Part 3 argues convincingly that the *Odes Sol.* are not gnostic and compares them with Qumran texts and John's Gospel, with which there are striking affinities. Charlesworth maintains that the similarities are best explained on the hypothesis that both the Gospel and the *Odes Sol.* "reflect the same milieu, probably somewhere in western Syria, and both were probably composed in the same community" by a former Essene. This is related to his dating of the *Odes Sol.* "not far from 100 CE."

This book is a valuable contribution to scholarship. It is particularly important for biblical scholars because of its discussion of the clear affinities with the Fourth Gospel and the best way to explain them. Since this is only volume 1, we may look forward to a further volume or volumes on the problems of the *Odes Sol.* It is hoped that the next volume will discuss a problem that arises from the fact to which reference is made on page 146: "Early Syriac inscriptions have been found containing the preformative yud." The third-person plural and masculine singular of the imperfect begin with *n-* in standard Syriac, including the *Odes Sol.*, but in early Syriac inscriptions, as in later Palestinian Aramaic, they begin with *y-*. There is no evidence for *n-* in early Syriac inscriptions before approximately the beginning of the third century, about a century later than the period in which Charlesworth dates the *Odes Sol.* It will be interesting to see how he explains this fact. Will he postulate, for example, a revision of the original language to bring it into line with later usage?

John Emerton
University of Cambridge

Collins, John J. and Robert A. Kugler, eds. *Religion in the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000. Pp. 167. \$18.00.

It has been said that one cannot understand one's own culture without understanding another's. The same is true about religions. The editors of this volume have gathered six other leading scholars to produce a fine collection of essays dealing with different aspects of the *religion* reflected in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Because "the Scrolls are older than, and independent of, both Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism," learning more about the Qumran community can help us reflect upon our own traditions, regardless of our particular religious affiliation.

The eight articles of the book are organized into four groups. The first two articles deal with conceptions of the divine. John J. Collins's "Powers in Heaven: God, Gods, and Angels in the Dead Sea Scrolls" questions whether one can speak of monotheism in the Dead Sea Scrolls when God is portrayed

in the context of a heavenly court of angels, holy ones, and other divine beings. Ultimately, Collins answers the question with a negative reply. Eileen Schuller's essay, "Petitionary Prayer and the Religion of Qumran," seeks to understand how the Qumranites' strongly deterministic theology may be reconciled with liturgical practice that includes petitions.

A second group of essays deals with the influence of Hellenism on the Qumran community. Martin Hengel discusses the broad interactions between "Qumran and Hellenism." He argues that, while the Qumranites opposed hellenization, they were so deeply influenced by it that the community was "a typical product of the new age in its sociological structure and organization, its use of technical progress, and its ideological system from abstract language to the holistic system of creation and history." Timothy H. Lim's "The Qumran Scrolls, Multilingualism, and Biblical Interpretation" discusses the presence and influence of the Greek language in the Scrolls.

The essays by Hannah Harrington and Robert A. Kugler form a third cluster, one that is focused on halakic issues. Harrington's article provides a very nuanced discussion of how the concepts of purity and holiness give coherence to a variety of the Qumranites' halakic rulings. Kugler focuses on the sacrificial halakot in 4QMMT and argues that "in lieu of participating in the sacrificial cult the [Qumran] community contented itself with rewriting the rubrics which governed the temple and its operations through harmonizing and narrowing exegesis."

The fourth group of essays comprises James C. VanderKam's "Apocalyptic Tradition in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Religion of Qumran" and Craig A. Evans's "Qumran's Messiah: How Important Is He?" VanderKam argues that despite the fact that the Qumranites themselves probably did not produce apocalypses, their use and acceptance of them—especially Daniel, 1 *Enoch*, and *Jubilees*—justifies the claim that they were an apocalyptic community. In particular, he points to the ways that conceptions of law and apocalyptic revelations are related in both the Qumran compositions as well as in Daniel and *Jubilees*. Finally, Evans provides a nuanced discussion of Qumran messianism. He argues that the Qumranites were not preoccupied with developing or defending their messianic views; rather, those views were presupposed in their hopes for a future restoration. In fact, he argues that their messianism was not very distinctive in early Judaism, countering the dominant view that the Qumranites subordinated the royal messiah to the priestly.

The essays in this book provide significant data that contribute to the conversations about larger theoretical questions regarding what constitutes "religion" and how one studies it. Collins introduces the collection by saying, "We speak of the religion of the scrolls rather than of their theology. The

subject includes not only the beliefs of the sect about God and the world, but also their religious practice." Several aspects of the religion of the Dead Sea Scrolls may be surprising to some. For example, Kugler's essay demonstrates how a specific language, in this case Hebrew, can be an important element of religion. Collins rightly acknowledges, however, that the collection of essays does not exhaust the subject matter of Qumranite religion, but is "a series of probes . . . [that together have] the character of a prolegomenon." Thus, he suggests that a comprehensive treatment would include other topics and categories, including cultic practice; mysticism; the form, use, and authority of scripture; the character and structure of the community; wisdom traditions and ethics; horoscopes and other magical texts reflecting popular practice; and finally the calendar.

The articles contribute to Qumran studies in that they do not shy away from discussing technical issues. Nevertheless, the essays are accessible to a general, educated audience. So, for example, English translations usually are provided when Hebrew and other non-English words and phrases appear. On a very minor point, I would note that the second Hebrew word on page 71 should be *br'î*.

All but one of these articles were first presented at a conference at Trinity Western University on April 24, 1999. In his introduction Collins acknowledges that Jewish scholars were not represented at the conference, an omission that is partially overcome by the inclusion of Hannah Harrington's article in the published collection. Nevertheless, the framing of the conference around religion rather than theology reflects the scholarly perspective that strives to limit inappropriate Christian bias. Thus, other essays rightly value and employ topics and categories that arise out of the Jewish tradition. So, for example, in addition to Harrington's article, Kugler examines ways that the biblical traditions were interpreted to produce halakot pertaining to sacrifice.

This volume will be of value, not only to scholars specifically interested in Qumran and early Judaism, but also to pastors, Christian educators, and people in other forms of Christian ministry.

Henry W. L. Rietz
Grinnell College

Brown, Michael Joseph. *What They Don't Tell You: A Survivor's Guide to Biblical Studies*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000. Pp. 157. \$10.95.

As the engaging title of this quite readable book suggests, Candler School of Theology's Michael Brown offers what he hopes will be a helpful guide for students and parishioners embarking on their first excursion into the often

destabilizing world of academic Bible study. As the subtitle suggests, the “rules of thumb” set out in this volume address the disconnection between biblical faith and biblical scholarship experienced by many, including Brown’s students at Wabash College and Greater Institutional AME Church (Chicago) in their initial academic Bible courses. The book is not meant as a replacement for the exegetical handbooks that became such close companions to many of us as we struggled through our first exegesis courses. Brown’s goal is to supplement these traditional aids by naming the presuppositions implicit in exegetical method and explaining the consequences of the scholarly “mindset” for biblical studies—precisely the sort of why and how questions students ask in the classroom or parish.

The book opens with a discussion of the distinctions between parish Bible study (“devotional and geared toward personal improvement . . . see[ing] the Bible as containing doctrines and self-evident truths”) and academic biblical scholarship (“the process of understanding, and possibly also explaining, what the Bible means”). With the exception of a seemingly unnecessary but mercifully succinct history of interpretation, this prolegomenon nicely prepares the reader for the instructions laid out in subsequent chapters. Then, in a handful of catchy propositions, Brown offers a clear digest of rules as to how students should approach interpreting biblical texts in an academic setting, use profitably the perspectives of biblical scholars that students must engage, and do both without damaging faith or abandoning the enterprise.

Brown’s choice of the designation “rules of thumb” for his propositions is deliberate: they are meant as practical and preliminary guidelines for doing exegesis, not an exhaustive compendium of interpretive dogmas. Each rule is clarified with illustrations from the Old or New Testament. For example, under “Rule of Thumb 15: Everybody has an ax to grind,” Brown presents a lucid, if simplified, summary of the influence of Deuteronomy’s theology on the presentation of Israel’s history by the Deuteronomistic editor. Similarly, he suggests that Matthew’s portrayal of the scribes and Pharisees is colored by the animosity between the emerging Christian movement and the Jewish community of which it has been a part.

I might disagree with Brown’s interpretations—he anticipates as much under “Rule of Thumb 20: Most biblical scholars can’t agree on lunch, much less the precise meaning of a text”—but his examples clearly demonstrate his points. A more significant weakness is the explicit restriction to historical-critical approaches in the exegetical sampling. Brown’s justification for the limitation is that historical criticism represents the “fundamental basis for interpreting biblical texts,” and the effect is to lift up and pass on to students a bias for one method of reading texts at the expense of others equally useful.

Today's biblical student would benefit from a more eclectic arsenal when faced with the variety of literature included in the canon.

Despite these criticisms, many teachers and pastors will recognize Brown's concerns. The encounter between the objectives and methods of critical biblical scholarship and the faith that encourages students to explore biblical texts in depth in the first place can be a painful and frustrating experience. Brown's book may not be *the* antidote, if indeed such a cure exists, but it is a handy pain reliever for the headache that frequently results from the collision of these two worldviews.

William Sanger Campbell
Rutgers University

Stevens, R. Paul. *The Other Six Days: Vocation, Work, and Ministry in Biblical Perspective*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999. Pp. 289. \$24.00.

R. Paul Stevens of Regent College in Vancouver has authored an important study. If taken seriously, it will challenge theological education in our churches and seminaries today. His basic proposal is that we should abolish the category of laity as presently taught and practiced. Positively put, we should reassert ourselves as the people of God; this would radicalize and dignify all Christians before God and their respective calling, work, and ministry in the marketplace.

The historic rise of clericalization in the church has distorted our appreciation for the biblical emphasis on the people of God. The Protestant Reformation highlighted the "priesthood of all believers"; this was intended in part to be a corrective to clericalization, but the Reformers essentially kept in place clerical leadership (the preacher replaced the priest), and the bicultural realities existing in the church continued. The pattern of theological education practiced by Protestant schools today is largely influenced by a Catholic model that separates seminarians from the laity, "thus guaranteeing their enculturation into a clerical culture. Theological education remains, by and large, the exclusive preoccupation of those intending a career in the clergy." This has not only eclipsed the biblical teaching on the people of God but has also neglected the nurturing of the laity, thereby often demeaning their significant ministry within the body of Christ.

No doubt there are laity who will not feel this way, and clergy, too. Nevertheless, I believe Stevens has made a compelling case for a people-of-God theology; he wishes to move such a perspective toward center stage as we seek to address a new generation of "postchurch Christians" who apparently can live without the institutional church. Furthermore, we would be

wise to welcome the laity to the classrooms of our seminaries. We need to recover once again the biblical mandate that we are co-ministers commissioned by a sending God (John 3:16) to be God's people called to serve through our respective stations in life.

Throughout the pages of this work Stevens points us toward an applied theology (for him, all theology is inherently practical) for "the *whole* people of God: a people without distinction of laity and clergy." Written with passion from an ecumenical as well as evangelical framework, this book presents a well-documented theology for the people of God engaged in worship, not only on Sundays, but also during "the other six days" of the week as they minister in the world. At the end of each chapter Stevens leaves the reader with questions, case studies, and suggestions for further study and discussion. An extensive bibliography is included. This is an excellent book that will stimulate church and seminary classroom discussions.

Carnegie Samuel Calian
Pittsburgh Theological Seminary

Cunningham, David S., Ralph Del Colle, and Lucas Lamadrid, eds. *Ecumenical Theology in Worship, Doctrine, and Life: Essays Presented to Geoffrey Wainwright on His Sixtieth Birthday*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. Pp. 312. \$49.95.

Reviewing a *Festschrift* is in some ways an impossible task. I was blessed, however, by two encouragements. The first is gratitude for the subject of this volume, Geoffrey Wainwright, Cushman Professor of Christian Theology at the Divinity School of Duke University, whose friendship is greatly cherished. The second is the care with which the editors, by their own acknowledgment, "set strict word-count limits and edited . . . essays without mercy and without remorse." Thus, the essays run to not much more than ten printed pages each, making them manageable for selective reading, especially in a teaching context. Their endnotes are also rich, wide-ranging bibliographical resources.

The twenty-four contributions by Wainwright's students, colleagues, and fellow ecumenists are nicely arranged in four parts, which comprise two pairs of subject matter: Parts 1 and 2 are respectively titled "*Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi*" and "The Shape of the Liturgy." Parts 3 and 4 are "The Nature of Doctrine" and "Church, World, Mission." This grouping of the essays happily expresses the uniqueness of Wainwright's methodology as found in his seminal work, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life* (1980).

The opening essay by James F. Kay, "The *Lex Orandi* in Recent Protestant Theology," sets well and rightly the theological tone of the whole book. After

examining the contributions of Thomas C. Oden, Alister E. McGrath, John H. Leith, Robert W. Jenson, and Christopher Morse on the role of worship or liturgical prayer in formulating or determining Christian doctrine, Kay concludes that despite these growing Protestant appeals to worship there is still "a remarkable lack of consensus as to what constitutes either the 'law' or the 'praying' denoted by *lex orandi*."

Another theme of the volume is the constant and controlling reference to the doctrine of the Trinity. Almost every article begins, focuses upon, or ends with such references, including Eberhard Jüngel's compactly written "Die Ewigkeit des ewigen Lebens." David N. Power is quite suggestive in his relating of the Trinity to the ecclesiological issue of *koinōnia*, and Richard Clutterbuck pushes this theme in the direction of contextualization ("mediated otherness") with reference to "culture." Similar issues surface in Robert Cathey's "*Christ and Culture* Revisited: Niebuhr's Typology in Wainwright's 'Orthodoxology.'"

Various ecclesiological questions regularly surface, such as the concept of "servant church" in Philip W. Butin's essay on the work of the late Lesslie Newbigin (whose biography Wainwright has just published), and the theme of the church in the *ordo salutis* taken up in Günther Gassmann's essay. Throughout the volume as a whole, there are frequent references to the Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry document adopted in 1982 in Lima, Peru by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. Several of the essays also suggest that the most undeveloped moment of a Word and Sacrament liturgy—"the prayers of the people" or general intercessions (in Protestantism historically known as the "pastoral prayer")—must be taken with far more seriousness, since such prayers are the climactic moment of the Liturgy of the Word (following rather than preceding the sermon) and in some important way expressive of the day's scriptural content. As Clutterbuck notes, "The prayers of intercession are an important test of any Christian community's commitment to the whole of God's creation and to the Church in different situations. What is offered in intercession can evoke solidarity with those from whom the Christian faith has been received—and with those to whom it has been transmitted."

The breadth and brilliance of this collection remind readers of the honoree's own extraordinary gifts, documented in a catalogue of his publications that runs some nine pages, as well as in the impressive listings of the *Tabula Gratulatoria* in the opening pages of what is, indeed, a *Fest!*

Horace T. Allen Jr.
Boston University School of Theology

Gerrish, B. A. *Saving and Secular Faith: An Invitation to Systematic Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999. Pp. 153. \$19.00.

Brian Gerrish has distinguished himself over the years as a historical theologian of the first rank, especially in his work on the Reformation and on nineteenth-century German liberalism. In *Saving and Secular Faith* he draws on the fruits of this labor to frame the task of systematic theology (or, more precisely, of *dogmatics*, which “seeks to present the whole faith of the church”). He offers us not only a kind of prolegomena to volumes that will follow, but also a careful, nuanced analysis of the phenomenon of “faith.”

Gerrish, who retired several years ago from the University of Chicago Divinity School and is now Distinguished Professor of Theology at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, VA, notes a tension in both Christian and secular use of the term “faith.” Faith can imply elements of intellectual assent (belief) as well as a fundamental confidence in the meaningfulness of human existence (trust). While showing that scripture and great theologians of the Christian tradition (including Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin) have kept these two senses of faith in dynamic relationship, Gerrish fears that belief has too often been unhinged from trust. Christian faith has then been understood primarily as a matter of accepting certain intellectual propositions (and of suppressing heresy), rather than as a way of construing “the story of Christ as a surprising, even paradoxical, disclosure of a divine benevolence that resembles parental care.”

Following suggestions in Calvin and Schleiermacher, Gerrish emphasizes the priority of faith as trust. While particular beliefs may help to communicate and nourish that trust (the author sees the church’s confessions as playing such a role), they cannot replace it. “The proper approach,” argues Gerrish, “is to begin not with the definition of Chalcedon . . . but with the actual experience of Jesus Christ that has led to the confession of his divinity.” We are driven back to scripture and its “picture” or “image” of Christ, against which we test particular beliefs about Christ.

While Christian faith lives by the grace of God that it recognizes in Jesus Christ, it is a subset of a broader phenomenon that Gerrish calls “elemental faith,” a confidence that our lives have meaning because there is an ultimate order of reality to which they are related. Gerrish investigates several varieties of this elemental faith, including belief in a moral order and belief in the regularity and predictability of nature (science).

Gerrish is particularly interested to draw out the implications of his analysis for the organization of a dogmatic theology but also sheds light on the pastoral task. Elemental faith is “assailed by doubts and tired by life’s contradictions. It fluctuates and sometimes is overwhelmed.” The Christian

faith offers reassurance and healing. It articulates and clarifies, stirs and strengthens, human confidence in the meaningfulness of existence.

Gerrish's phenomenology of faith will help pastors recognize the variety of ways in which people seek meaning for their lives. But he leaves open the possibility that other forms of faith might construe human experience as well as, or better than, Christianity. He does not entirely clarify why one would choose to be Christian, rather than Buddhist, Hindu, or Islamic, or why one would not simply cobble together a faith from a variety of sources.

While Christians must always be open to the possibility that God is at work in other forms of faith, they have generally regarded the gospel as something more than a way of construing human experience. The gospel is God's truth. It challenges and redefines our elemental faith, including the church's efforts to formulate faith. The gospel undercuts all human triumphalism and sends all forms of religion, including the Christian, to the cross. Readers will eagerly await Gerrish's own dogmatics to see how he explores these questions.

John P. Burgess
Pittsburgh Theological Seminary

Gregersen, Niels Henrik, Willem B. Drees, and Ulf Görman, eds. *The Human Person in Science and Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000. Pp. 218. \$25.00.

A volume in the series "Issues in Science and Theology," published under the auspices of the European Society for the Study of Science and Theology, this interdisciplinary collection of essays makes important contributions to the aspect of the burgeoning science-theology conversation that focuses on human being. The contributors (two psychologists, a physician, two philosophers, and three theologians) do not collaborate in support of common theses, but they do address the same themes. Theologian N. H. Gregersen introduces the volume with a helpful mapping of the conceptual issues involved in the variety of concepts of personhood used in such discussions.

The contributors are distinguished scholars in their fields who are as conceptually careful when they venture outside their scholarly specializations as they are within them. While they do not explicitly address one another, they generate fruitful, if implicit, conversations among themselves. This is a stimulating and rewarding book for anyone interested in how theological anthropology and the social and biological sciences might fit together.

Five essays address the theme of a "bio-cultural paradigm of personhood." The theme urges an important conceptual expansion of many theology-and-science discussions that routinely focus only on issues raised for theological anthropology by developments in the biological sciences. Philosopher Mary

Midgley's opening essay outlines an argument, presumably on behalf of the theological believer in human responsibility, that science, whether biological or cultural, does not entail fatalism. Several subsequent essays also critique "determinist" readings of biological research. Psychologist F. Watts reviews relevant scientific literature showing the intertwining of biological and social aspects of personal life and suggests its coherence with theological claims. H. Lagercrantz, Professor of Pediatrics, sketches how a child's brain develops and briefly refutes neurogenetic determinism. In a programmatic essay theologian P. Hefner outlines a theological understanding of persons as emergent, as "what the human body/brain can become" in the context of a network of relations with the world, other persons, and God. In an especially strong essay that concludes Part 1 theologian M. Welker develops a careful analysis and acute critique of European modernity's concept of "autonomous person," a concept on which some of the earlier essayists arguably trade.

The essays in Part 2 address a second theme, "Supervenience, Mind, and Culture." The notion of "supervenience" posits "levels" of process and activity in human being, such that "higher," truly personal levels "supervene" on lower biologically explainable levels without conflict with or reduction to them. Philosopher D. Bielfeldt develops a rigorous and sophisticated critique of the idea of supervenience. Gregersen develops an ingenious philosophical-theological "holistic" alternative to conventional physicalist notions of supervenience. Psychologist J. Teske's essay concludes the volume with the thesis that the human spirit, meaning our capacity to apprehend meanings and purposes beyond our individual lives, is a social and historical construction, not determined by neuropsychology, and is embedded in evolutionary processes. Uncertainty whether this thesis is an alternative to or a variant of "supervenience" may be an indication of the slipperiness of the latter.

David H. Kelsey
Yale Divinity School

Ottati, Douglas F. *Hopeful Realism: Reclaiming the Poetry of Theology*. Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1999. Pp. 134. \$14.95.

In an American society in which the mainline churches have lost much of their cultural status, many pastors and laypeople are tempted to pull the church inward, toward a self-enclosed community of faith or toward a privatized spirituality. Reflecting the best of the Reformed tradition, Ottati insists that the church must engage its culture, being open to that culture's insights on truth, and challenge culture toward reform.

Hopeful Realism is a collection of six public addresses and one redraft of a

previously published essay. The settings range from a convocation at Macalester College to adult education classes at Presbyterian churches and a Presbytery ministers' retreat. Two themes, presented in the first two chapters, run throughout the seven essays.

Chapter 1 presents the author's substantive argument that the church must challenge its culture. American culture is dominated by a social Darwinist vision of reality. Life, in all its facets, is a game, and the goal is to win. Leadership training in business, culture, and beyond celebrates this mythology of ceaseless competition and seeks to hone skills that will give a person or group the competitive advantage to come out on top. In contrast, popular therapeutic spirituality presents personal growth as the goal of life. Reducing all of life to either a competition or private gratification is unrealistic. Theology aims through its doctrinal symbols to present an alternative vision of what is most ultimate in life. Compared to our cultural mythology, this Christian vision is more realistic. There are limits to our ability to control our situation, and the competitive world we have created is full of violence, injustices, and failures of relational fidelity. It is also more hopeful. The symbols of creation, providence, and redemption point to traces of God's activity in the world on our behalf. We experience genuine communion at times with others, as persons who exhibit expansive generosity and responsibility.

Chapter 2 presents the author's methodological claim. If the Christian faith is to portray this alternate vision of ultimate reality, theology must regain a poetic understanding of its symbols. Rejecting both literalistic and functionalistic understandings of theological language, Ottati espouses a critical-realist position. As with art and literature, so in theology the images and models explore and interpret, but never entirely capture, the nature of the ultimate reality.

Ottati's chapter on Jesus' resurrection (Chapter 4) exemplifies his theological method. The gospel narratives of the empty tomb and resurrection appearances of Jesus point to core meanings, such as Jesus' continuing presence with the disciples and with us as the living Lord of our life, and the trustworthiness and goodness of God. To the question "What happened?" Ottati claims that whether a resurrection interpretation portrays Jesus' body as physically raised and transformed (so Karl Barth or Stephen Davis), or as pointing to some kind of experience of seeing Jesus after his death (so John Shelby Spong or John Hick), the wide variety of interpretations of what happened on Easter Sunday is acceptable as long as the interpretations convey the core meanings of the event.

Ottati also has an intriguing chapter (Chapter 5) showing implications of

the incarnation for ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. Luther held that the word and flesh are so united in Jesus that the eternal Logos who is truly manifest in Jesus Christ is universally present and active beyond the man Jesus as well, in the patriarchs and prophets, in nature, and beyond the church.

The great strength of Chapter 5, its detailed discussion of a theological concept, reveals the main weakness in some other chapters. Many of the discussions of the theological doctrines lack depth and detail, hurting the move of their application to culture. I found myself reading all the footnotes, hungry for more than brief discussions and general statements. For example, some use of Robert Bellah, Robert Wuthnow, or Nicholas Wolterstorff might have deepened the author's portrayal of Christianity's "hopeful realism." Ottati's chapter on the Trinity (Chapter 3) makes no mention of the contribution of a social understanding of the relation of the three Persons by such theologians as Jürgen Moltmann, Jean Zizioulas, Elizabeth A. Johnson, or Leonardo Boff. Repetition of sentences or whole paragraphs among essays again gives the impression that we are not moving into deeper ground.

These limitations may be due to the book's nature as a collection of public addresses. Despite these shortcomings, Ottati's chapters on the resurrection and ecumenical dialogue, the vision of hopeful realism, and his understanding of theology as poetic portrayal of reality give pastor and layperson insight into how to think theologically.

Gregory Anderson Love
San Francisco Theological Seminary

Jones, Serene. *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000. Pp. 214. \$17.00.

Serene Jones overlays feminist theory on top of Christian doctrine to show how feminist theory alters the configuration of theology. Defining feminist theory broadly as texts and conversations that share the goal of the liberation of women, she uses it to locate signals that will allow women to enter into the familiar but sometimes alienating terrain of Christian doctrine and to find direction within it. Her aim in this project is not to reconstruct theology. Rather, she reorients it so that it confronts the reality of women's lives. Jones puts it this way: "I like the image of remapping because it captures well the fact that feminist theory's principal contribution to theology lies in analyzing and reorienting the conceptual markers that Christians use to describe the terrain of their faith."

Jones does not approach this project as a disinterested outsider. She invites

the reader into her own theological world. Recalling interactions with students, conversations held by her Tuesday-night women's group, and the confessions and traditions of her Reformed faith community, she shows how feminist theoretical concepts make sense out of women's experiences in the world and in the church. The stories of these women accomplish much more than merely placing Jones's ideas in context. They enable the reader to identify with a woman's felt need to inhabit doctrinal space comfortably.

Feminist theory allows Jones to situate women in such discussions as Luther's and Calvin's presentations of the doctrines of justification and sanctification. She exposes their sexist biases but still finds hope for women within traditional doctrine. Jones places women at the center of Luther's and Calvin's conversations, invites them to settle into that doctrinal space, sizes it up in relation to the realities that women face, and then redirects the conversation in light of those experiences. For women to see God come to life as creator and redeemer through these doctrinal lenses, Jones argues that the story needs to be told in reverse. Women must first have the opportunity to ground their identity in God. Putting sanctification first means that God welcomes and affirms a woman's being before calling her to live as a coherent self and to act as a forgiven and forgiving agent of grace. Bringing the terms of Luce Irigaray's feminist theory to bear on Christian theology, women meet God in their own skins and come to know themselves as "envelopes" of grace. Jones's revisionist interpretation of the benefits of faith sheds light on what it might mean for women to flourish. Sanctification and justification known in these terms enliven her subsequent discussions of sin as "grace denied" and church as "graced community."

Church professionals will benefit from this book by having an opportunity to recognize the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to theology, to see a theologian at work, and to enter into dialogue with her. Jones takes on a task that leaders in the church often neglect as she analyzes how another discipline can inform Christian theology. She gives Christians good reason to broaden their epistemological base by showing how feminist theory deepens our understanding of human nature and God's concern for all human beings. The Christian faith as she interprets it is not flat and detached from members of the faith community. It speaks directly to the messy and complicated reality of women's lives. Perhaps most important, the conversation has not ended as the reader completes the final chapter of this book. For Jones the project will continue, and she hopes that her ideas will continue to be discussed and tested.

Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty
Union Theological Seminary & PSCE

Hunsinger, George. *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000. Pp. 375. \$39.00.

According to theologian Robert Jenson, it is the fate of systematic theologies to be despoiled and dismembered by their admirers. This decidedly mixed blessing has certainly befallen Karl Barth, whose work has been raided for its treasures countless times since the great Swiss theologian's death in 1968. All the more reason, then, to pay attention to this fine book by George Hunsinger, Director of the Center for Barth Studies at Princeton Theological Seminary. In the midst of all the cannibalistic hubbub, Hunsinger sets himself a very different task: to let Barth's theology speak on its own terms, in all its breadth, depth, and fractal-like intricacy, and, from that starting point, to engage a wide range of classical and contemporary viewpoints in thoughtful conversation.

The book collects fifteen of Hunsinger's previously published and unpublished essays written over the last two decades. The essays are divided into three sections that admirably display the breadth of Barth's staggering theological accomplishment and of Hunsinger's own interest in Barth: political theology, doctrinal theology, and ecumenical theology. In the section on political theology, Hunsinger pleads urgently for a contemporary hearing of Barth on issues of nonviolence, social justice, militarism, war, and peace. Concerning doctrinal theology, he treats Barth on christology; pneumatology; the Trinity, eternity, and time; scriptural interpretation; and the question of universal salvation. In the section on ecumenical theology, Hunsinger unfolds Barth's theology in relation to Roman Catholicism, Luther, modern liberalism, and the postliberal theology of the so-called Yale School. An additional essay discusses the hermeneutics of Carl Henry, the conservative evangelical theologian, and Hans Frei, Hunsinger's own teacher and one of the great teachers of Barth of the previous generation.

The book concludes with a brief meditation on the blood of Christ. Although the meditation makes no mention of Barth, it underscores a theme that stands at the heart of each section of the book, namely, Jesus Christ's intrinsically perfect work of reconciliation, completed *once for all* and *for all* by his death on the cross. Indeed, from one point of view, the book's fifteen essays are all meditations on the indispensability and implications of this great central affirmation, illuminated from a variety of perspectives, now political, now doctrinal, now ecumenical.

Hunsinger has a gift for listening attentively to Barth and presenting what he has heard in sympathetic, lucid, and accessible terms. The gift is on strong display in the essays on doctrinal theology, especially those on christology,

pneumatology, and eternity and time in the life of the Triune God. I thought that these essays were the finest in the book; indeed, they are among the best pieces of Barth exposition that I know. Recently, Barth has come in for pretty forceful criticism on all three topics, not least from his admirers. Although Hunsinger engages the critics only at the margins, his work seems designed in part as a defense of Barth. Hunsinger forces Barth's interlocutors to engage his thought in its subtlety and sophistication. Everyone has heard that Barth is a "dialectical" thinker, but Hunsinger repeatedly evokes this realization in fresh and illuminating ways that will prove instructive for the beginner and longtime reader of Barth alike.

The book is more than just a study of Barth, however. Many of the book's essays bring Barth's theology into sustained conversation with other figures, such as René Girard, John Howard Yoder, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Martin Luther, George Lindbeck, Gustavo Gutiérrez, and others. These essays have a spaciousness and openness to them that belies the caricature of Barth's theology as insulated and inaccessible. (Hunsinger's essay on Barth's hermeneutics, which labors under a heavy burden of technical jargon, is a partial exception to this general rule.) The essays exemplify a way of doing theology that may justly be said to exhibit a "generous orthodoxy," uncompromisingly committed to Christian theology's distinctive subject matter, but also inquiring, imaginative, and eager for conversation on left and right.

A similarly broad but more urgent spirit informs two striking essays in the section on political theology, in which Hunsinger calls North American Christians to resist U.S. militarism and political and economic imperialism overseas. Written in the 1980s, the essays command respect as snapshots of Hunsinger's own determination to avoid a false choice between "progressive politics and traditional faith," and as illustrations of the inseparability of Christian witness and political responsibility in the Barthian tradition. However, they are apt to strike many readers (as they did this one) as being of rather limited help in finding compass bearings for a responsible Christian politics today. Perhaps Hunsinger will take up the challenge in fresh essays in some other place.

Hans Frei once alluded to the striking contrast between the *liveliness* of Barth's theology and the *woodenness* of so much Barth interpretation. Time and again, George Hunsinger escapes this common fate and draws his readers into the lively dynamism of Barth's work. He helps us hear what Barth says and see why it matters. For that, we are in his debt.

R. Kendall Soulen
Wesley Theological Seminary

Dorrien, Gary. *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology: Theology without Weapons*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000. Pp. 239. \$29.95.

Regarding the way eighteenth-century theologians dealt with the problem of theology, Barth wrote, "In fact, as far as success is concerned, one cannot but pass the historical judgment that the food was not as hot as the cooking." One is tempted to make a similar judgment about Gary Dorrien's historical overview of Barth's theology. On one hand, there is an interesting, meticulously documented historical account of Barth's theological and personal development from his Marburg student days; to his revolt against the liberal theology of his teachers; to his isolation in relation to those who once were his theological allies; to his battles with Gogarten, Brunner, and Bultmann; to his political affiliations; and finally, to a picture of Barth as a theologian who "subordinated faith to revelation" in an effort to defend theology from the uncertainties of grounding theological truth in changing history or in experience. Glimpses of the mature Barth of the *Church Dogmatics* are provided at various points in the discussion, and every effort is made to show that, although Barth turned against what could be termed Herrmann's "subjectivism," there always remained something of Herrmann's own theological approach evident in Barth's theology. The book is certainly worth reading if only because it presents such a thorough and well-documented historical overview of Barth's life and work.

On the other hand, while the historical cooking is hot enough (except for a few odd historical opinions such as the claim that the supposed "neoorthodox" theology of T. F. Torrance and E. Jüngel has little interest today, and Dorrien's apparent belief that there was merit in Bonhoeffer's charge of "revelational positivism"), one must wonder about the theological judgments offered by Dorrien. Is Dorrien a "Barthian" or not? Is Barth a neoorthodox theologian or not? Was Barth a "revelational positivist" or not? At the outset Dorrien informs us that he is neither a "Barthian" nor part of any "neoorthodox" group because of "Barth's antifeminism, his doctrinal dogmatism . . . and his complete disinterest in interreligious dialogue." Also, he apparently agrees with David Tracy's belief that "neoorthodoxy" "achieved its religious gains by refusing to submit Christian claims to critical analysis." Various, throughout the book, Dorrien presents Barth as a neoorthodox theologian, yet one who cannot be categorized as neoorthodox with those who followed him, such as Torrance and Jüngel. Dorrien seems to believe that Barth is guilty of "revelational positivism" at times, but then he insists upon Barth's innocence. Could that mean that, in the end, Dorrien himself is really a "Barthian" who is not quite sure about which version of Barth he wishes to propose to a postmodern audience? For Dorrien, "[t]he appropriate test of Christian theology is not whether it conforms to or confirms

any independent theory of reality, but whether it makes present the narrated Word of Christ in all of its sovereign freedom."

Insofar as this book leaves room for the fact that it is indeed the Word of God revealed, written, and proclaimed that is the sovereign judge of true theology, one would have to suggest that Dorrien is indeed an advocate of Barth's continued theological relevance. Insofar as this book suggests that theology can actually make present the narrated Word of Christ in its freedom, it is clear that Dorrien himself is seeking a theological criterion beyond and apart from the one disclosed in the history of Jesus Christ himself. For Barth, only the Word of God himself, the incarnate and risen Lord, could make himself present in and through the biblical witness and church proclamation. Theology simply cannot do this. This is where Barth's theology is in conflict with Dorrien's understanding of it. For Dorrien, "Barth's theology was too biblicist and dogmatic." Here he uncritically adopts elements of the misguided criticisms of Bonhoeffer, Brunner, Reinhold Niebuhr, Thielicke, Tillich, and others because he wishes to find a way to demonstrate the truth of the Christian faith that will appeal apologetically to people within and without the church. But the very question raised by Barth's theology applies to this attempt: Will we end with Christ if we do not begin our theology by acknowledging him as the only possible starting point and conclusion for proper theology? Dogmatic theology cannot think outside faith in the lordship of Jesus Christ demonstrated in his resurrection from the dead. That is why Barth's trinitarian theology had practical implications that were demonstrated throughout the *Church Dogmatics*, but scarcely mentioned in this book. True, Dorrien indicates that for Barth knowledge of God is an "event enclosed in the mystery of the Trinity," and he does mention the fact that Barth developed a doctrine of the immanent Trinity that accounted for "continuities within and between God and created being." Instead of allowing Barth's material concerns to shape his own view of Barth's theological development, however, Dorrien advocates a version of natural theology that will allow him to treat other religions as vehicles of grace and thus advance a theology that is less dogmatic and less exclusivistic than Barth's. Barth's theology, however, was inclusive precisely because he identified Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life and did not seek to corroborate his belief in Christ with "whatever can be known about God or Jesus on the basis of reason." Dorrien's apologetic question here suggests just the kind of separation of faith and reason against which Barth's "theology without weapons" fought.

Paul D. Molnar
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Steffen, Lloyd. *Executing Justice: The Moral Meaning of the Death Penalty*. Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1998. Pp. 185. \$17.95.

The politics of capital punishment in the United States have changed dramatically in the past two or three years. In January 2000, Illinois Governor George Ryan announced a moratorium on executions in that state, and legislatures in Nebraska and New Hampshire have also taken steps to stop the death penalty. Public opinion polls show support for the death penalty dropping precipitously, even to a minority position when the option of life imprisonment with parole (which most states now have) is offered as an alternative. There are virtually no criminologists today who are arguing that the death penalty has deterrent effects stronger than those of long imprisonment. Since 1972 some ninety death-row inmates have been released after substantial doubts about their guilt came to light. As Father Robert Drinan has observed, there are few issues on which American religious and civil-rights leaders show more agreement than on a collective belief in the inherent immorality of capital punishment.

Against this backdrop Lloyd Steffen (Professor of Religious Studies at Lehigh University) has given ministers, chaplains, and students of theology a book that should prove to be extremely valuable for their study of the moral bases of the death penalty. Those looking for fodder for their debates, lectures, and sermons about the death penalty will find it here.

Steffen begins by describing the case of Willie Darden, a Florida prisoner who went to the electric chair in 1988. At his racially tainted trial Darden's court-appointed attorney was badly outmatched by an overzealous prosecutor, and evidence that could have cast substantial doubts about Darden's guilt was never presented. Steffen discusses various meanings of the concept of "justice" and questions whether justice was indeed achieved by sending Darden to the hereafter.

Steffen's search for moral justifications for capital punishment takes us through the philosophies of John Locke, Jeremy Bentham, and especially John Stuart Mill and Immanuel Kant. Mill's utilitarian justification of the death penalty, grounded in the assumption that homicide rates will be reduced when capital punishment is widely used, is outlined and criticized. Next, Kant's ideas, holding that the death penalty can be legitimized on retributive grounds, are also summarized and evaluated. Steffen finds neither theorist persuasive.

Steffen then constructs what he calls a "theory of just execution," by which he means an ideal type of system of capital punishment that might produce enough benefits (primarily principled retribution) to be utilized and justified.

But he then compares the theory to the practice. Several factors, such as racial and class inequities in the administration of the death penalty, the inevitability of error, and the pervasiveness of vengeance, lead Steffen to conclude that today's use of the death penalty cannot be morally justified.

Steffen's firm conclusion is that justice is never attained by a death-penalty process that is as fallible and influenced by race and class as the American system turns out to be. Here is the major contribution of Steffen's work. He does not simply examine the moral justification of the death penalty *in theory*, as one might in focusing on biblical passages; he examines the moral basis of the death penalty *as it is actually applied* in the U.S. today. His conclusion is that the death penalty is a "moral evil and a theological horror."

Conservative voices such as George Will and Pat Robertson have recently called for a moratorium on the death penalty because of widespread problems in its application. After systematically linking these empirical realities to general theories of morality, Steffen takes the challenge one step further by calling for permanent abolition of the death penalty. Readers will find his arguments timely and important.

Michael L. Radelet
University of Colorado

Hauerwas, Stanley, Chris K. Huebner, Harry J. Huebner, and Mark Thiesen Nation, eds. *The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999. Pp. 494. \$49.00.

To those who knew John Howard Yoder well, the idea of a volume celebrating his thought may seem problematic in various ways. That Yoder himself "did not honor honor," as Stanley Hauerwas puts it, is really the least of the problems. Will the book focus on Yoder's articulation of Christian pacifism, neglecting his understandings of church and of discipleship that provide context for the former? Will it be geared toward heady, abstract theological issues, neglecting Yoder's lifelong concern for the everyday life of the church? Will it be too narrowly Mennonite, neglecting Yoder's brilliant engagements with the full range of Christian traditions and with Judaism? Will the allegations of misconduct and the process of church discipline that clouded his mature years (and which delayed the publication of the book) be acknowledged? Will Yoder's thought be too simplistically identified with that of Hauerwas, as has often happened among their "mainstream" readers?

These concerns arise for me in light of the presence of John Yoder in my life as well as in my thinking. Though I was never Yoder's student formally, conversations with him during the last few years of his life were decisive for

my renewed commitment to the Mennonite tradition that I had first embraced during my adolescence. John was a theologian, but he was also a pastor, a brother, and a friend to many who knew him (in spite of his disconcertingly "academic" manner). To my delight, the editors have gone far toward addressing these concerns, yielding a volume that is representative of the wide and varied influence that Yoder has had, not only intellectually, but practically and personally.

The multidimensionality of Yoder's concern for both church and world is clear in the previously unpublished essay by Yoder himself, "'Patience' as Method in Moral Reasoning: Is an Ethic of Discipleship 'Absolute?'" Addressing the "academic" question of whether he is an ethical "absolutist," Yoder characteristically shifts the discussion to how one ought to engage in dialogue with others who disagree. Consistent with his conviction that Constantinian pretensions must be renounced, he shows that the deeper issue is that dialogue must be genuine and noncoercive, while also showing that this does not require renouncing the conviction that one's own belief is true.

Hauerwas's own contribution to the collection (aside from his brief and appropriately personal preface to the volume) is cast in the form of a dialogue with Chris Huebner, one of his Mennonite students. In the course of the dialogue, Hauerwas discusses how his own thinking diverges at crucial points from Yoder's. Huebner—a Mennonite "according to the flesh," as Yoder himself once put it to me, and whose reading of Yoder far predates Huebner's association with Hauerwas—serves as an incisive critical interlocutor. The dialogue suggests that the contrast between Hauerwas's "contrarian" style and Yoder's more "patient" approach might be more than a superficial difference. Though some of the allusions made in the dialogue could have been more adequately referenced, it is a delightful read and is quite illuminating with regard both to Yoder and to Hauerwas.

Explicitly pastoral or congregational concerns often inform the various contributors. Of special note is a paper by Gayle Gerber Koontz, which reflects on a particular instance of communal discernment in the early 1980s at the Associated Mennonite Seminaries in Indiana, where Yoder taught periodically and where Koontz is professor of theology and ethics. The response of the seminary community to an individual who began attending classes as a guest, but soon "wore out his welcome" in various ways that deeply challenged the hospitality and patience of the community's members, provides a case study in community response to an ongoing transgression of its standards. The process led to a nonviolent social ostracism, or "ban" (to use the common term from the Amish/Mennonite tradition), rather than forcibly removing the individual from campus. Considering these events in

relation to Yoder's thought, Koontz presents a compelling call to further reflection on the shape of ethical discernment at the communal and institutional levels. The paper provides substantial food for thought for those drawn to Yoder by their concern over the negative aspects of contemporary individualism.

The more clearly "theoretical" pieces in the book often carry discussion of Yoder's work in suggestive theological directions. Notable here is Gerald W. Schlabach's wonderful essay on Yoder's critique of Constantinianism in relation to a deeper, "Deuteronomic" question. As Schlabach nicely states it: "The Deuteronomic problem is the problem of how to receive and celebrate the blessing . . . that God desires to give, yet to do so without defensively and violently hoarding God's blessing." Interesting connections are also explored with the thought of other figures such as Jacques Ellul (by Marva J. Dawn), Ernst Troeltsch (by Arne Rasmusson), Dietrich Bonhoeffer (by Mark Thiesen Nation), and James Cone (by J. Denny Weaver).

I focus here on a small selection of the more than twenty essays in the book, hoping that this will convey the richness of the essays as well as their diversity. The book is well worth seeking out for anyone, academic or not, who shares Yoder's passion for understanding critically what it means to follow Jesus Christ. If there is a significant deficiency in the volume, it is the lack of contributions from outside North America and Western Europe. Yoder's works have also had impact in Asian and Latin American settings, and this could have come through more clearly. The lack of an index will also be frustrating to some readers. These shortcomings do not diminish the fact that *The Wisdom of the Cross* is a moving tribute and a valuable resource for those of us who have been touched by Yoder's intellect and by his commitment.

Peter C. Blum
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Young, Josiah Ulysses, III. *No Difference in the Fare: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Problem of Racism*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998. Pp. 178. \$22.00.

Any Christian of conscience who comes to America from abroad, as Bonhoeffer did on two occasions, quickly understands that race is the unavoidable issue for the national soul. Other questions may be urgent—capitalism and foreign policy, for example—but it is the still unresolved issue of race and racism that this book rightly puts on top of the agenda of church and nation. The unique achievement of Josiah Young, Professor of Systematic Theology at Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, DC, is to scrutinize Bonhoeffer's theology from beginning to end from this one perspective.

In doing so, Young opens up to the general reader Bonhoeffer's first two very dense books, *Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being*—now available, incidentally, in the new translations of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Edition. Long before it was popular in philosophy and culture to talk about the "other," this was a central category of Bonhoeffer's theology. For him Christian existence is always in social relation to the ultimate "other," namely God. By analogy, human existence is always a social relation of self and other in the I-Thou relations of individual persons and simultaneously a relation of self and community in family, church, culture, work, and politics. Young demonstrates that the inviolable status of the other person, the thou, as the one who embodies the claim and word of God, is an antiracist anthropology and ethic in its essence.

Up until now this insight has chiefly been recognized in the context of Bonhoeffer's German experience during the Hitler regime, above all in his rejection of the anti-Semitism of National Socialism and especially his efforts on behalf of Jews. Young rightly adds to this the importance of Bonhoeffer's Harlem experience during his year at Union Theological Seminary, 1930–1931. There is every reason to believe that his experience of black Christianity at Abyssinian Baptist Church was very formative for him. In contrast to his often scathing criticism of white churches and theological students in America, Bonhoeffer wrote that in black worship "the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the savior of the sinner, is really preached and accepted with great welcome and visible emotion." Myles Horton, a student at Union in 1930–1931, has reported one occasion on which Bonhoeffer himself uncharacteristically displayed just such visible emotion:

Early one Sunday afternoon . . . Bonhoeffer came from the Abyssinian Baptist Church where he was teaching a Sunday School class. He was excited and talkative and instead of going to his room he described the preaching with excitement and audience participation and especially the singing of black spirituals. He was very emotional and did not try to hide his feelings, which was extremely rare for him. He said it was the only time he had experienced true religion in the United States, and was convinced that it was only among blacks who were oppressed that there could be any real religion in this country. . . . Perhaps that Sunday I witnessed a beginning of his identification with the oppressed which played a role in the decision that led to his death. Certainly I witnessed an insight that too few of my countrymen appreciate. (Bonhoeffer Society *Newsletter* No. 39)

No Difference in the Fare is a "must read" book for anyone concerned about Christianity and race in America. It will force pastors and theologians to criticize their preaching and teaching with sentences such as this: "One might say that nazism as well as the American contempt of African-Americans have been nothing but the desire to push God out of the world." Further, the book is more than a reading of Bonhoeffer; it will enrich readers by introducing them to scholars Young reads, not least Francophone theologians and philosophers in Africa.

Reading Bonhoeffer through the hermeneutical lens of race not only yields striking insights; its very focus also limits the angle of vision. Elsewhere I have argued that the soteriological problem in Bonhoeffer is chiefly concerned—not with guilt, as in Luther—with *power* in both its interpersonal and sociopolitical forms. The distribution and exercise of power, of course, is crucial for any theology dealing with racism. Again, Young's discussion of "the other" draws heavily on Bonhoeffer's version of the I-Thou relation but does not equally employ Bonhoeffer's parallel social analysis of corporate group relations—the place at which American race discussions and policies repeatedly fall short. But precisely matters like these can now be taken up because of Josiah Young's contribution in this original and provocative book.

Clifford Green
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Hook, Brian S. and R. R. Reno. *Heroism and the Christian Life: Reclaiming Excellence*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000. Pp. 253. \$23.95.

Heroism is a most difficult concept in our multicultural age. Conflicts in values make every candidate for heroism a subject of controversy. The overwhelming intrusion of mass media into our private lives means that none of our sins and failures can remain unexposed. To speak of Christian heroes is even more complicated. Classical understandings of heroism are radically at odds with Christian discipleship, which proposes an ideal of self-denial: "Not my will, but thine." This fascinating book by a classical scholar (Hook) and a Christian theologian (Reno) at Creighton University is an apologetic, elaborating this conflict in order to help us see and understand "the distinctive form of Christian heroism" demonstrating "self-denial as a form of human excellence."

The opening chapter lays out the challenge, commenting upon Nietzsche's perceptive argument regretting the triumph of Christianity over the classical ideal in the contest for the soul of the western world. In the authors' desire to "recover the role of excellence" they clarify three ways in which heroism

is devalued today: the democratization or leveling of the concept by applying it too easily to almost anyone, the sentimentalization of heroism that is the very private admiration we have for one who has particularly inspired or helped us, and the incidental hero such as the fireman who rescues a child. These devaluations diminish our ability to identify human excellence, the authors argue.

Elaborate interpretations of classical heroism as dramatized in Homer's Achilles, Plato's Socrates, and Vergil's Aeneas are portrayed and analyzed. It might be hoped that those who have never read Homer's *Iliad*, Vergil's *Aeneid*, or Plato's *Apology* would turn to them for further illumination. Those of us steeped in these classics might wonder why Odysseus is not included. He is a far more attractive hero, winning the Trojan War by using his intelligence rather than following the emotional and self-absorbed Achilles, who thought it could be won only by physical prowess.

Subsequent chapters focus upon Jesus, seen in his "messianic triumph," and then Paul standing for "transparency and imitation" in early Christianity. Although Jesus can be molded into classical patterns of heroism, the early Christian writers' frame of reference was not classical literature but the Old Testament. Both literatures, however, illumine for us the problems of recognizing, imitating, and participating in heroism's achievements. The method of this book's argument is literary, not historical. Though one might regret the assertion that "[r]eading historical criticism of the New Testament is like eating sand: it neither offers pleasure nor provides nutrition," the literary approach can offer some profound insights. The Gospel of Matthew provides the background of messianic expectation that speaks to the problem of participation. The Gospel of Mark addresses the problem of recognition, especially as it uses images of blindness and seeing. It is Paul who demonstrates the way of participating in Jesus' heroism. His ideal of transparency—"Not I, but Christ in me"—best expresses the heroic role of Christian discipleship.

Turning to the early modern world, two great English poets of Christian heroism, Edmund Spenser and John Milton are considered. They are theoreticians, "self-consciously seeking to appropriate the poetic imagery and the heroic sensibilities of Homer and Vergil in order to explain and underline the Pauline vision of Christian heroism." Spenser works with symbol and allegory in *The Faerie Queen*, while Milton chooses the epic model in his *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. Here we find "poetic accounts of the human person enlarged and perfected by grace."

This volume's literary tour finally brings us to two profound twentieth-century examples of antiheroism: Albert Camus and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Camus's *The Plague*, an "allegory of resistance to evil," portrays a hero who simply lives as a man, "connected to the passions of ordinary life," which alone enables us to resist evil. It is Camus's conviction that the universe is inhospitable and merciless, and the best vocation we humans can have is to live in solidarity with each other, enduring with courage our common fate. The remarkable characters that come to life in this moving novel (Father Paneloux, Jean Tarr, and Dr. Bernard Rieux) show us a variety of antiheroic stances. Although Dr. Rieux seems heroic, he rejects the very idea of heroism. He is characterized as a skeptic with "almost superhuman detachment." Bonhoeffer, living amidst the atrocities of Nazi Germany, shares that detachment, writing *The Cost of Discipleship*. For him, being a Christian simply means following Jesus: "Christ has triumphed, and he shall be all in all. Discipleship entails entering into that triumph, and in so doing, the Christian resists nothing, but rather accepts all." It is the world that resists, not the Christian. Those who martyr are active, the martyr is passive.

The book concludes with a call to reclaim excellence. Three influences are discussed as reinforcement for the contemporary conviction that normalcy and comfortable survival are good enough goals for normal folks. We do not need to be heroic. The influences are "egalitarian piety," a commitment to the equal dignity of all, "cynical suspicion," a critical sensibility that exposes the values set before us by social hierarchies devoted to power and self interest, and "supine indolence," an indifference to heroism evoked by excessive consumption and easy, undemanding lives. The authors believe that Augustine's decision to write *The City of God*, a "Christian epic of world history, signals a basic truth about the literary and poetic atmosphere in which Christian faith flourishes. The glamour of discipleship and the real glory of Christian virtues are most visible in the context of fulsome heroic discourse." It is the Christian poets Milton and Spenser who reclaim heroism and excellence. We should know them, study them, and act accordingly. This book is a valuable introduction to great literary texts that can enlarge our understanding of human beings whose lives exhibit wisdom and faith.

James T. Livingston
Princeton, NJ

Chesnut, Robert A. *Transforming the Mainline Church: Lessons in Change from Pittsburgh's Cathedral of Hope*. Louisville: Geneva, 2000. Pp. 180. \$19.95.

"Are you ready for radical change?" That was one of the first questions Robert Chesnut posed to the chairperson of the search committee that interviewed him for the position of senior pastor at East Liberty Presbyterian

Church in Pittsburgh. The inquiry proved to be prophetic for Chesnut's ministry, and in this volume he recounts his efforts to bring "deep and wide" change to this congregation.

When Chesnut came to East Liberty in 1988, the church had been losing members for three decades, dropping from above 2800 to just over 700. The community surrounding the church had undergone significant change, with population losses and shifts and the decline of a once prosperous business community. Church leaders had responded with a variety of social service ministries and community development projects, but the downward trend continued.

The new pastor seemed well suited for the job. As an undergraduate in the late 1950s he had written a research paper on "The Church in the Changing City." The six central points he outlined there (embracing a diverse and inclusive membership, adapting worship styles to the local culture, using mass media for outreach, involvement in neighborhood ecumenical mission, seven-day-a-week programming, and offering a community of care and healing for the lost and lonely) provided a framework for guiding and evaluating his efforts at East Liberty. That early research had been supplemented by experiences in a storefront mission, service in several congregations, and a stint leading an urban field-education program at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago.

The book is divided into three major sections. In Part 1 Chesnut chronicles the implementation of a number of new emphases and programs during the first five years of his ministry. Characterizing the gospel as "venture capital," he began with a marketing campaign to raise community awareness of the congregation. The results were affirming: increases in membership, worship attendance, and financial contributions, all correlated with growth in staff and programs.

The second five years (1994–1998) were more troubling. Stresses and strains that were evident but quiet in the earlier period now led to open conflict. The trustees and music staff were focal points of the struggle, and the pain Chesnut describes is palpable. Occasionally it bleeds over into anger, and readers learn more than they need to know about the combatants. The good news is that a strategic plan was eventually adopted, along with a set of goals for a new music and arts program. The victory was not without casualties; the strife left Chesnut demoralized and in need of a four-month sabbatical.

The final section of the volume describes further developments in programming and provides a positive evaluation of the results based on the six points Chesnut featured in his undergraduate research report. The author

closes the book with a cautious optimism about the future of “progressive mainline churches” such as East Liberty, provided they have the courage to confront the challenges that he and his colleagues faced there.

On the basis of the information he provides, one would have to say that East Liberty Presbyterian Church is a unique congregation and Robert Chesnut a creative leader. He rightly recognizes the necessity and risk of change, and his book makes an important contribution to the growing literature in congregational studies. Two caveats seem to be in order, however. First, this is the story of a large, well-endowed city cathedral with financial resources to hire consultants and staff to assist in most areas of church life. The translation of the experience at East Liberty into the language and context of the average congregation will be difficult. Second, Chesnut sometimes ignores his cardinal conviction that a central task for transforming the mainline church is to distinguish the gospel from the various cultural trappings in which we have encased it. A notable example is the way he uncritically baptizes principles from the world of business to provide support for his entrepreneurial style of leadership. A further concern is that his enthusiasm for seekers and New Age spirituality occasionally leads him to put an overly optimistic spin on research about the changing face of religion in America.

In spite of these shortcomings, Chesnut’s book clearly highlights the central issue facing mainline congregations: to stop taking for granted our way of being and doing church and to begin to ask how our life together and our mission reflect our central convictions about God and what God calls us to be and do.

John E. Mehl
Pittsburgh Theological Seminary

Kingdon, Robert M., Thomas A. Lambert, and Isabella M. Watt, eds. *Registers of the Consistory of Geneva at the Time of Calvin*. Vol. 1, 1542–1544. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000. Pp. 470. \$50.00.

This promising addition to Calvin and Reformation studies is a translation of *Registres du Consistoire de Genève au temps de Calvin, 1542–1544* (1996), the first volume of a critical edition of *Registres du Consistoire de Genève*. The hardship and complexity involved in the task of rendering a language into another should not be underestimated. The translation of this particular book is especially challenging because the text is “very difficult, containing many incomplete and self-contradictory sentences.” The original registers of the Geneva Consistory (the GC hereafter) were shorthand minutes of the GC

meetings in Old French, and most of them were never revised. Given the situation, frequent omissions and mistakes were inevitable, and hence the content is often unclear and demands a great deal of guesswork. The editors' deliberate attempt to deal with these problems has resulted in endless annotations. However, the translation by M. Wallace McDonald successfully demonstrates overall clarity and linguistic sensitivity by providing the rationale for choosing a certain word—English or French—in footnotes.

In order to understand the text, a careful reading of the translator's note, preface, and introduction is essential. The general editor, Robert M. Kingdon, who has advocated the value of the registers for a long time and initiated the project of their transcription, wrote the preface. In it he relates the most recent history of Consistory studies and the whole process of the transcription venture. The co-transcribers and editors, Thomas A. Lambert and Isabella M. Watt, wrote a comprehensive introduction that allows readers to grasp the basic ideas about the early activities of the GC and laypeople's responses to them.

The GC was established in late 1541 to oversee people's behavior and belief based on Calvin's theological convictions about "good discipline." According to Kingdon, the GC was "a hearing court, a compulsory counseling service, and an educational institution." The GC served to control the morals of Genevan people. It met every Thursday and heard from those summoned for reasons pertaining to faith, card games, inappropriate songs, insults, breach of marriage promises, marital problems, fornication, spouse abuse, conflict between neighbors, and so on. Calvin himself participated in the meetings as much as he could unless he was prevented by sickness or travel to other countries. In these first three years of registers one notices Calvin's nearly incessant presence and his occasionally visible pastoral advice. The registers do not clarify Calvin's thoughts, but they certainly provide "a rich source for our knowledge of the daily life of Genevans in the key period at the beginning of the Protestant Reformation."

Until now, despite their significant academic value, these registers have not been easily accessible and so have not been properly examined. Due to the difficulty of reading shorthand Old French, it was not possible to work on them without special training in paleography and much patience. Therefore, Kingdon, his transcription team, and the H. H. Meeter Center for Calvin Studies (which supported the transcription project) deserve great praise for making this "treasure house" available to all readers.

The registers are full of interactions between people and the GC and will bring occasional smiles. These registers are "of the nature of a set of lecture notes or rough drafts of case reports, not the sort of verbatim transcripts

expected in modern trial reporting, and certainly not a set of well-digested reports." Therefore, the editors' annotations, as well as the translator's footnotes and glossary, are exceptionally useful to identify people, places, the flow of events, and the contemporary usage of particular terms. Furthermore, they relate people to their previous and later encounters with the GC.

These early years of the registers show their extraordinary character as witnesses of the consistorial enforcement of a new faith and lifestyle in lieu of the Roman Catholic norm. Most frequently the registers record recitation of prayers and confessions and checkups on regular attendance at sermons or catechism classes. The second most common problems concern marriage. From its inception the GC devoted much of its time to marital problems as if it were still playing the role of the pre-Reformation bishop's court. These records give distinct insight into contemporary customs and the Protestant attitude toward sex and marriage.

For scholars whose interests reside in the ministry of John Calvin, in the history of discipline in the Reformed tradition, or in lay piety of the sixteenth century, this book will serve as a primary source. It will also provide constructive reading for anyone engaged in ministry, lay or ordained, who is interested in how an early Protestant community accommodated a new way of faith into its daily life.

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Guelzo, Allen C. *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999. Pp. 516. \$29.00.

With all the biographies that have been written on Abraham Lincoln, one would think that nothing new is left to say. Allen C. Guelzo offers a new take, however, as he traces the intellectual and spiritual development of the sixteenth president. The result is a sometimes uneven work that nevertheless makes a forceful argument for Lincoln's Whiggish inclinations long after the Whig Party had collapsed. Guelzo also argues, rather less convincingly, that Lincoln, who had long since abandoned his Calvinist roots, underwent a kind of epiphany in 1862 when he resigned himself to providence in deciding when—or if—to issue the Emancipation Proclamation.

Much of the book reads like a traditional biography, tracing Lincoln's early years, though Guelzo is careful to take note of what Lincoln reportedly read and what his contemporaries recalled about his religious leanings. The first half of the book proves to be the most problematic, which is partly a

reflection of the paucity of sources on Lincoln's youth and early manhood. Guelzo leans heavily on the interviews that Lincoln's law partner, William Herndon, and an associate conducted after the president's death. Used carefully, these can be rewarding sources, as Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis point out in their collection of these interviews, *Herndon's Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln* (1998). But Guelzo does not note the pitfalls of Herndon's material—faulty memories, for instance—until the epilogue. Moreover, he adopts Herndon's harsh bias against Mary Lincoln, whose marriage to Lincoln Guelzo unconvincingly claims was purely a political move on the latter's part.

When he moves into the 1850s and has a larger record from which to draw, Guelzo gains his footing. Lincoln was a committed Whig who believed, largely because of his own experience, in equal opportunity and social mobility. This philosophy, not one based on racial equality, drove Lincoln to oppose slavery: men, he thought, should benefit from their own labor. The demise of the Whig Party did not shake his beliefs in self-improvement, and when Lincoln reached the White House he was able to act on them, signing (though, Guelzo fails to note, not initiating) legislation to revamp the public finance system and to dole out public land for colleges, railroads, and homesteads. "Lincoln's executive and legislative agenda amounted to nothing less than a repeal of six decades of Democratic dominance of federal government," Guelzo writes, and this agenda killed the Jeffersonian ideal of a nation of independent farmers.

Through most of his life Lincoln was a deist, as were many of the Enlightenment figures who influenced him. Still, he never quite kicked his early Baptist belief in predestination. Nor did he ever overcome his childhood view of God: if a heavenly father were anything like Lincoln's earthly one, such a God would be distant and judgmental, disinclined to grant grace to a man as unworthy as the grown-up Lincoln believed himself to be. A man who never acknowledged the Trinity, Lincoln had no hope for his own redemption.

Nevertheless, under the pressure of the Civil War and the accompanying bloodshed, Lincoln the unbeliever showed signs of coming to a certain religious understanding, as the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural Address both suggest. Whether this was a sincere transformation or a contrived appeal to a nation with a deep Christian background remains unclear, but Guelzo never considers that Lincoln may have referenced God only as a way to connect with a society steeped in religion. Instead, Guelzo argues that Lincoln came to his most profound decision—to issue the Emancipation Proclamation—by turning himself over to providence. In September 1862

the war was going badly, and Lincoln drafted a memo contemplating God's will regarding the contest. Guelzo believes this is when Lincoln turned himself over to providence. Within days of his decision to follow what he perceived to be God's will, Guelzo says, the fight broke out at Antietam. The battle was a nominal Union victory, but it was enough to allow the president to issue the proclamation that had been sitting in his desk drawer for weeks. "God has decided this question in favor of the slaves," Lincoln told his surprised cabinet.

Guelzo's contention that Lincoln had had an epiphany of sorts is not airtight, but his assertion remains provocative and deserves serious consideration. His arguments on Lincoln's ideas of political economy, however, are much stronger and provide a solid framework for understanding the working philosophy of the nation's greatest president.

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Clements, Keith. *Faith on the Frontier: A Life of J. H. Oldham*. Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999. Pp. 515. \$39.90.

Joseph Houldsworth Oldham, Joe to all his friends, was one of the great missionary and ecumenical leaders of the twentieth century. He was born in India and educated in Edinburgh, Oxford, and Halle in Germany. He was won for Christ and Christian mission by the Student Volunteer Movement and the preaching of Dwight L. Moody. In a long life he was, in turn, a missionary to India; a mission educator for the Church of Scotland; the organizing secretary of the first World Mission Conference in Edinburgh in 1910; a founder and first General Secretary of the International Missionary Council and of its journal, *The International Review of Missions* (which, without the final "s," still is published); organizer of the World Conference on Church Community and State at Oxford in 1937; one of the architects of the World Council of Churches at its first Assembly in Amsterdam in 1948; and, through it all, an interpreter of the Christian faith in the worlds of politics, philosophy, and science.

Here, for the first time, we have a thorough, authoritative biography of this remarkable man. It is written by an author who is himself, as a scholar and now as General Secretary of the Conference of European Churches, immersed in the same ecumenical ministry. Oldham was a prolific writer of books, reports, articles (including a periodical, the *Christian News-Letter*, which he edited), and personal correspondence. Keith Clements has explored all of these texts, plus the written and oral memory of others, to give us a full

picture, not only of the man and his work, but of the ecumenical history of the church in mission that he helped to guide through the first half of the twentieth century. Page by page we are led through that history, with its visions, its great events, its struggles, and its conflicts. Ecumenical church politics was not smooth, especially when one believed, as Oldham did, that declarations, theological or otherwise, are not ends in themselves but guides to policy, and that study is in service to witnessing action. We learn, for example, that he questioned the second world mission conference in Jerusalem in 1928, though he helped to prepare it, preferring that the International Missionary Council give its attention more to action in the field. We hear about his disappointment with John R. Mott's persistence in old patterns of missionary rhetoric at the cost of social analysis and action, and of his clashes with colleague William Paton and later with W. A. Visser 't Hooft about the structure of ecumenical agencies. Some history will have to be revised in the light of what this book reveals.

The motif that runs through the whole story, however, is deeper than these conflicts. It is the theme of missionary ecumenism that Oldham embodied: the rigorous theological search for the form of a gospel that will truly engage the world in all the forms of its secularity with the promise and the claim of God in Jesus Christ. In the 1920s he was one of the first, out of his experience with the church and colonial policy in East Africa, to deal ecumenically with Christianity and the problem of race. At Amsterdam in 1948 he coined the concept "responsible society," which guided ecumenical social ethics for a generation. Oldham was in continual dialogue with political leaders and with philosophers such as Karl Mannheim, Michael Polanyi, and others, personally, or by correspondence and critical reading. He sought out and cultivated younger persons among clergy, missionaries, and laity who had new, even if undeveloped or unorthodox, experiences and ideas. Into the evening of his life he was continually bringing such people together to explore the frontiers of faith in the world. "Real life is meeting," he believed, and he lived it to the end.

The biography concludes with a full bibliography of Oldham's writings and secondary works cited in the text, a chronological summary of Oldham's life, and an epilogue in which Clements sums up, with critical appreciation, his subject's whole career. Oldham was great but not perfect: something of an intellectual elitist, or perhaps, as Clements suggests, a Victorian believer in universal influence of education. Reinhold Niebuhr's awareness of the way in which human sin distorts human reason and even human piety did not play a strong role in his ministry. A whimsical description of his working method, "find out where the power is, and have lunch with it," may have betrayed

more confidence that power could be made responsible by Christian persuasion than is always justified. Oldham was not a powerbroker, a campaign organizer, or a revolutionary. Still, as a searching servant of Christ's reign in the world, he was always engaged in both prayer and social action. His colleague Kathleen Bliss described him as a "wily saint," a modern embodiment of Christ's command to his disciples, "Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." We can learn a great deal in our time about this art, from Joe Oldham the man and from this biography.

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MacDonald, Ian R. *Aberdeen and the Highland Church (1785-1900)*. Edinburgh: Saint Andrew, 2000. Pp. 294. £12.00.

This is an interesting account of the social and religious life among Scottish Highlanders who moved to Aberdeen during the nineteenth century. It is a poignant narrative of the attempts made by one group of Gaelic-speaking exiles to maintain its unique identity, while at the same time seeking acceptance and integration. The author, Dr. Ian R. MacDonald, a Highlander with roots in Abriachan, is a retired research scientist from the University of Aberdeen and author of *Glasgow's Gaelic Churches: Highland Religion in an Urban Setting, 1690-1995* (1995).

During the eighteenth century more and more Highlanders in search of work migrated to other parts of Scotland. Aberdeen's developing industries, chiefly quarrying and weaving, encouraged the recruitment of Highlanders as a cheap source of labor. The opportunities that the city offered for regular and remunerative employment were attractive, especially when set against the grinding poverty and ever present threat of starvation that were the legacy of an infertile terrain. Soon a Highland community with its distinctive language took shape in the city.

Monolingual, Gaelic-speaking Highlanders felt deprived of spiritual nourishment, since there was no opportunity to join in the public worship of God in their own language. Even for those Gaels who had a working knowledge of English, Gaelic was felt to be indispensable for the proper worship of God. Only what was preached in Gaelic was regarded as a real sermon; what a minister presented in English was regarded as amounting to no more than merely a lecture.

It was not until February 1786 that a group of Highlanders presented a petition to the Presbytery of Aberdeen, requesting aid in obtaining "a missionary [i.e., an ordained minister] to preach the Gospel and perform other

acts of religious worship in the Gaelic language." The petition presented to the presbytery affirmed that there were in Aberdeen eight hundred persons incapable of deriving edification from public worship in the English language, and a list of their names was appended.

There were many difficulties in obtaining a succession of suitable, bilingual ministers. According to MacDonald, a basic problem in bringing Highland preachers to Aberdeen was a matter of Highland transport. At this time "the city was effectively an enclave accessible mainly by ship, a means of transport which was unpredictable, often hazardous, and always infrequent. . . . If wheeled transport southwards was slow and expensive, northwards it was non-existent. The problem here was the lack of proper roads and bridges. . . . Horseback was the standard means of travel for those who could afford it. The alternative was to walk. Both means required a robust constitution."

Following the foreword, written by Donald E. Meek of the Chair of Celtic in the University of Aberdeen, the book is in three parts. Part 1, "A Gaelic Vision in Aberdeen," provides information concerning the succession of Gaelic-speaking ministers who were induced to come to serve in the initial Gaelic Chapel. Part 2, "The Waning of the Gaelic Church," tells of the Disruption of 1843, when 474 ministers of the Scottish Church resigned their livings in the parishes of the Established Church. The ministers who signed the Act of Separation and the Deed of Demission, as the instrument of resignation was called, had no disagreement with the Church of Scotland. Their protest was against state interference in matters that involved the Church in what the protesters considered to be the exercise of its spiritual discretion.

Part 3, "Forsaking the Past," focuses on social aspects of the Gaelic Church and the class conflict that promoted new forms of worship, such as the use of hymns, psalms, and an organ in public worship. The practice of standing for prayer was discontinued and replaced by standing for praise. The Highland Church also experienced tensions introduced by a rapidly changing society. This was especially noticeable in the secularizing of the Lord's Day in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Throughout the book, which is no mere monument to the past, the pages speak powerfully to a modern Scotland wrestling with ethnic diversity and cultural pluralism.

The chapters are supported by frequent bibliographical references to a wide variety of earlier church records. An appendix identifies manuscript minutes of kirk sessions, and there is an extensive bibliography of printed books and articles. Five indexes list ministers, other persons, authors, places, and subjects. A map of Aberdeen in 1795 showing the locations of churches

is followed by a chart tracing the principal divisions and reunions in the Presbyterian Church in Scotland between 1733 and 1900. Plates depict eighteen persons, buildings, and documents.

All in all, this volume presents a scholarly and comprehensive narrative, written with sympathy and understanding. It will be consulted for years to come.

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Seitz, Laura S. and Elaine D. Baxter. *Before the Throne of Grace: An Evangelical Family in the Early Republic*. Franklin, TN: Providence House, 1999. Pp. 470. \$39.95.

Not only has religion in America changed dramatically in the past quarter of a century, but so has the academic study of religion. Nowhere are these revolutionary developments more evident than in the field of American religious history. An interest in the theology of social elites and the institutions they inhabited has given way to a focus upon the "lived religion" of the people in the pews. *Before the Throne of Grace* is a fascinating study because it demonstrates that religious elites had a "lived religion" too.

Seitz and Baxter examine the lives of two generations of the James Richards family from the late eighteenth century to the mid-1870s. Yale educated, pastor of the prestigious First Presbyterian Church in Newark, New Jersey, 1805 moderator of the Presbyterian Church, a member of the Board of Trustees of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University), and a founder of the Auburn Theological Seminary, James Richards (1767-1843) was a bona fide elite. The senior Richards played a prominent role in shaping the direction of the antebellum Presbyterian Church. His social standing also brought him into contact with numerous cultural and political dignitaries. Alexis de Tocqueville, for instance, visited the Richards family while touring America in 1832.

Before the Throne of Grace concludes with an examination of the tragic life of James Richards Jr., an alcoholic, philanderer, and Presbyterian pastor. This work, however, is not only concerned with the male members of the Richards family. The work explores the lives and the faith of several Richards women, most importantly, Elizabeth Beals Richards, Anna Smith Richards Beach, and Harriet Caroline Richards Dey. Like the male members of the Richards family, none of these women is a household name today. But what makes this volume not only interesting but also a significant contribution to the field of American religious history is the fact that it explores the daily faith

of one family. As such, the work provides a fascinating window into the nineteenth-century American family. Given the struggles with domestic abuse, alcoholism, and marital infidelity that certain members of the Richards family had, it appears that dysfunctional families are not a problem unique to the contemporary American scene. Although not the intention of the authors, the work clearly debunks the popular notion that the nineteenth century constituted some sort of golden age for American families.

Drawing upon a wealth of letters and family papers, which are held in archives stretching from New York City to California and numerous points in between, this work uncovers how religion impacted individuals, families, and society at large. For example, the authors demonstrate how the controversy surrounding Charles G. Finney's revivalist methods and concomitant theological innovations divided Old and New School Presbyterians and eventually led to the 1837 schism within the Presbyterian Church. While debates over Arminianism and semi-Pelagianism might seem rather abstract and lifeless today, both the men and women of the Richards family had a deep and personal interest in them. This study suggests that theology was inseparable from the lived faith of many people in the nineteenth century. It also reveals how major nineteenth-century economic, political, and social developments impacted the lives of an American family. Abolitionism, the 1831 Nat Turner rebellion, the professionalization of the ministry, and the post-bellum temperance movement are just some of the issues and events that intersect with the lives of the Richards family.

Although the authors depend uncritically upon certain secondary studies, such as the outdated work of Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker, *Princeton: 1746-1896* (1946), their engaging and well-written study should interest more than just American religious and cultural historians. It should also be attractive to ministers and laypeople interested in learning more about how the Christian faith impacted the daily lives of people in the nineteenth century.

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White, James F. *The Sacraments in Protestant Practice and Faith*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1999. Pp. 168. \$17.00.

Those who seek an introductory discussion of the meaning and practice of sacraments and related acts across the span of Protestant history find it in this work. It will be helpful if the reader has had a survey course in the history of the church since the Reformation, but this is not a prerequisite; for, as always,

James White provides the reader with a clear organizational scheme and avoids technical language without ignoring difficult concepts.

This volume begins with a discussion of sacramentality as a theological category of rather recent origin; there is also in this section consideration of the number of rites that should be called sacraments. White then gives two chapters each to baptism and the eucharist; although the two necessarily overlap, in each case the first chapter deals with practice and controversy, and the latter with theological meaning.

White next deals with those things "commonly called sacraments" (the practices the Reformers continued to use but refused to regard as sacraments): penance (confession and reconciliation), healing the sick, marriage, ordination, and burial. The final chapter explores the future of sacramental observance; consisting of fewer than four full pages, this is less satisfying than other sections of the volume.

Endnotes reveal the scope of the study: nearly 500 notes for fewer than 150 pages of text. A brief glossary, a bibliography, and two indexes (one of persons, the other of subjects) round out the volume.

Denominationally, White includes those often neglected from such discussions (for example, Society of Friends and Mormons). Also included are many groups that historically have found the term "sacrament" to be as offensive as the number "seven" (Baptists and Pentecostals, for instance). Throughout the book there are helpful insights that contravene the usual assumptions, such as: "[At the Reformation] penance did not disappear; it simply attached itself to the eucharist."

Flashes of humor enliven what some may consider an inherently dull subject: "The chief difference between a United Methodist eucharist and a Roman Catholic one is that United Methodists use real bread and Roman Catholics use real wine." Or this, concerning the individual glasses used at the eucharist instead of a common chalice: "Whatever else they believe, Americans believe devoutly in germs." Again: "Biblical literalism and the Enlightenment made good companions because they both preferred to relegate divine activity to the first century."

As all authors and editors have discovered, spell-check features do not alert us to the wrong choice from a pair of homonyms. So probably the printed assertion that "the church has always ordained discrete [unattached] homosexual men" should read "discreet" [judicious in conduct]. But either meaning could make sense. Also with respect to ordination: inasmuch as John Wesley's consecration of bishops (whom he did not want to use that title) is regarded as irregular by many Anglicans, one can readily dispute the statement that "in 1980 [United Methodist] Marjorie Matthews became the first woman bishop in historic continuity."

This work is solidly grounded historically and very pertinent to the present age. For example, the implications both of baptism and of the eucharist for social justice are spelled out in concrete and compelling ways. White believes passionately that worship is not an ecclesiastical game nor an escape from daily life into some ethereal realm but rather the church's profound encounter and engagement with the world about us—as that world, redeemed by Christ, is seen anew from a divine perspective. That is why sacraments matter.

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Resner, André, Jr. *Preacher and Cross: Person and Message in Theology and Rhetoric*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999. Pp. 205. \$18.00.

In *Preacher and Cross* André Resner offers a timely consideration of the relationship between the person of the preacher and the message preached in any sermon. The bulk of the four chapters into which his work divides takes up the rhetorical category of *ethos*, the qualities of the speaker that inspire trustworthiness.

After surveying classical rhetoric's treatment of *ethos* in his first chapter and homiletical theory's relationship to the same in his second, Resner discerns an impasse between two positions, a standoff he summarizes as follows:

Some, operating with rhetorical principles as primary, have followed Aristotle to draw the conclusion that the person of the preacher, as with any orator, is perhaps the most important factor in the persuasion of the hearers. Others, operating with theological assumptions as primary, have argued that since preaching is nothing less than God's word for which God alone is responsible and which God alone makes efficacious, then any talk of the human person making the word "more efficacious" is idolatrous.

In response, Resner turns in the third and most substantive chapter to the apostle Paul, and especially to Paul's defense of his person and authority (his *ethos*) in his correspondence to the church in Corinth. Where numerous scholars have read Paul's remarks as a radical break with, and even denigration of, classical patterns of rhetoric, Resner perceives that Paul does not so much dismiss classical rhetoric's understanding of *ethos* as he does invert it. For where classical rhetoric conceives of *ethos* as the speaker's ability to assess the audience's expectations of what makes a good speaker and "act accordingly," Paul refuses to accommodate himself to the Corinthians' expectations

and, in fact, attempts to reframe their sensibilities altogether in light of the cross of Jesus Christ.

According to Resner, the central ethos issue shifts for Paul from the trustworthiness of the preacher to the trustworthiness of God. The God "who justifies the ungodly" and "did not spare his own Son" is the one who guarantees the trustworthiness of the message. Precisely because the preacher is one of the "ungodly" in need of justification, the preacher must refuse to ground the validity of the message in his or her own moral qualities. In such a situation, Paul as a Christian preacher can be faithful to his calling only insofar as he describes his own plight as a sinner, his own need for mercy, his own unworthiness of forgiveness, and his own status as a beneficiary of God's grace.

While Paul's decision to adopt an ethos of "self-effacement" appears foolish in terms of classical standards of rhetoric, it is grounded in the logos of the crucified Christ, a "logic" that offers a whole "new framework for understanding and discernment in community and world." From Paul's perspective, Jesus' cross and resurrection challenge all human understandings of God and human community, and that includes rhetorical considerations. As Resner writes, "The new way of knowing afforded by the cross necessitates a new way of being in the world which is destined to conflict with old-age ways of knowing, such as the ways that people adjudicate authenticity and credibility."

Paul's "reverse *ethos*" solves the dilemma Resner originally posed by locating the trustworthiness of the message, not with the preacher, but with God. By doing so, Paul needs neither to deny nor glory in the inevitable link between the person of the preacher and his or her message. From Paul's perspective, the preacher becomes a living example of a sinner that has been saved, a lost person redeemed, one who was dead and is now alive. In short, the person of the preacher stands not as some tool used to persuade the audience but, rather, as the living arena in which the grace of God continues to be played out.

In his fourth and final chapter Resner compares this understanding of ethos with several recent homiletical works and then develops more fully the implications of his project for preaching.

Resner's volume comes as a timely alternative to the tireless (and often tiring) debate between those for or against the use of rhetorical categories in understanding and teaching preaching. His treatment of Paul is particularly insightful, as his explication of the apostle's "reverse rhetoric" allows Resner to acknowledge the inevitable relationship between preaching and rhetoric

while simultaneously taking seriously the demands that the gospel makes upon the rhetoric—or any human vessel—by which we seek to proclaim it.

Along with these strengths, Resner's work is also marked by several deficiencies. While his treatment of classical rhetoric is sound, he ignores all developments of rhetoric in the twentieth century, overlooking towering figures such as Kenneth Burke and Chaim Perlman. Similarly, he jumps quickly from the fourth-century Augustine to the twentieth-century Karl Barth and Fred Craddock with nary a consideration of other points of view, ignoring as he does the theological and homiletical work of Philip Melancthon, Hugh Blair, or John Broadus, just to name a few. Finally, he is perhaps overly critical of some of those who have adopted rhetorical categories to advance homiletics. Robin Meyers and Craddock, for instance, would perhaps better be faulted for assuming the gospel (and therefore not noting the rhetorical demands it makes) than selling out the gospel, as Resner sometimes seems to imply they do.

Despite these flaws, Resner's volume is worth its price. His explicit claim regarding ethos is well-developed and persuasive, and his implicit argument regarding the demands the gospel makes upon any use of rhetoric might worthily consume his attention, and that of his generation of homileticians, for some years to come.

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Buttrick, David. *Speaking Parables: A Homiletic Guide*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000. Pp. 254. \$24.95.

For many readers this book may be a new experience of David Buttrick. We all know him as a fine theological and biblical scholar, a most important and wonderfully opinionated homiletical theoretician, and—for those who have heard him—a powerful preacher. Some have known him as an outstanding teacher. In *Speaking Parables* we are introduced to Buttrick the model mentor, who by means of all of the above takes us by his kindly pastoral hand. Nowhere else is his care for the gospel, the craft, and the preacher so graphically revealed as here. This is Buttrick at his best.

Just the chapter "Preaching Parables" is worth the price of admission, but it is the synergy of the components that makes this work so special. For example, the concise review of parable study (referencing such scholars as Adolf Jülicher, John Dominic Crossan, and Paul Ricoeur) and Buttrick's own exegesis of over thirty parables of Jesus are concretized in fourteen actual sermonic treatments. Then, he criticizes the sermon manuscripts. But, note

this, the sermon manuscripts are his—and he does not go easy on his own work!

In all of this, Buttrick takes his own theoretical base as detailed in his *Homiletic* (1987) and applies it to his own preaching. In both his critique and in the sermons themselves, he shows courage, candor, and care. His advice to preachers about what to do in the possible conviction that one of the gospel writers has misunderstood one of Jesus' parables is important advice for lectionary followers who may need to ask whether the preacher is supposed to preach the text or the gospel. By the way, he utilizes his own translation of the texts with fine skill.

His advice to preachers is given with both clarity and compassion. More than that, he names variables with precision that otherwise might be left to the preacher's intuition. For example, he notes that "when we preach parables, a factor to be considered is what might be termed 'distance.'" He then asks: "Is the parable immediately powerful, move after move, or are we standing back looking over the parable with a much more contemplative disposition?" In short, the issue is reframed as the question about "stance," whether to utilize "a wide or narrow lens." Likewise, Buttrick shows concern for both ecclesiological and cultural issues and warns against the privatization of parabolic meaning. Parables, he says, must not "be reduced to inner effect or turned into Rorschach inkblots."

Buttrick's scholarship is comprehensive as well as current, his critique of North American culture prophetic, his biblical hermeneutic sound. If you want to know what it might be like to follow Buttrick's homiletical convictions into the pulpit, this is the best place to find out, because here he presents them in both theory and practice. Moreover, the book's pastoral style is compelling. You feel as if you are having a personal conversation with the author. Although focused specifically on the parables, this volume is, I believe, the most accessible route into the mind and heart of David Buttrick.

Eugene L. Lowry
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Gillette, Carolyn Winfrey. *Gifts of Love: New Hymns for Today's Worship*. Louisville: Geneva, 2000. Pp. 94. \$7.95.

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette is co-pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Pitman, NJ. In the tradition of Cecil Frances Alexander, Gillette often writes hymns that give biblical and theological concepts a voice for children. She writes her texts to fit tunes that are available in most current mainline-denominational hymnals.

This collection of forty-five hymn texts is divided theologically into four themes: The Bible: Singing the Story; The Church: God's Loving Community; Seasons, Sacraments, and Celebrations; and The Church in the World. The book includes a variety of helpful indexes: biblical references, tunes, metrical, topical, and first lines and titles. Each hymn comes with commentary on its origins and the author's intent.

The texts are unpretentious and generally appropriate for children. In her attempts to blend current theology and poetic art—a complex task at best—sometimes the results are uneven. The unevenness comes for this reviewer primarily in two areas: rhymes that seem contrived and choices of tunes that may trivialize the text or inadequately support the theological theme. In both cases, a poetic/aesthetic dissonance occurs. Consider the following text to the gospel-song tune, TO GOD BE THE GLORY (strongly associated with Fanny Crosby's gospel hymn by the same title):

Sing out! Sound the trumpets! Proclaim jubilee!
Through words from Isaiah, we came to be free;
For blessed by the Spirit, Christ read from that scroll,
Proclaiming his mission: to make our lives whole.

Refrain

Hear the word! Sing it out! It's good news to the poor!
Christ has come! Let us shout! We are captives no more!
Lost sight is restored, and God's world is set free:
Christ came to our world to proclaim jubilee.

I am pleased to have a text on this theme. There is a classic progression of the three stanzas. Stanza one is grounded in scripture—Isaiah's call and Luke 4:18–19. Stanza two elaborates the call to include women, children, and prisoners. The final stanza addresses God through a petition for God's church to share “jubilee love with the world everywhere.” While based on solid, classic hymn-writing strategies, I believe, however, that the effectiveness of the message is diminished by little things, such as the second rhyme in the first stanza—*scroll* and *whole*. While “scroll” alludes to Jesus' visit to the synagogue in Luke 4:16, it seems forced in this situation. Moreover, though the tune communicates in its own way the exuberance of jubilee, it may prove distracting for singers who know Fanny Crosby's original text. For those who do not know the original, this tune may seem antiquated and unwieldy for the new text.

Similar problems arise for this reviewer in other hymns: “God's Great Love Is So Amazing!” to the tune of CONVERSE (“What a Friend We Have

in Jesus”), “Welcoming God” to the tune ASSURANCE (“Blessed Assurance”), and “Christ Be with Us” again to the tune of CONVERSE. While I appreciate the singability of gospel-song tunes in general, they are strongly allied with specific texts that convey a personal theology and may not always be the best choices for recent hymn texts.

There are some poignant text and tune pairings, however. I found the use of PASSION CHORALE (“O Sacred Head Now Wounded”) to be particularly effective with the following text:

The storm came to Honduras, to Nicaraguan towns;
El Salvador felt anguish as rains came crashing down.
O God of wind and water who made the sea and sky,
Amid such great destruction, we ask a mournful, “Why?”

Though the text is one of profound theological depth, the author maintains a straightforward childlike quality. The tune establishes a subtle link between Christ’s suffering and the suffering of those in Central America.

While these hymns are generally quite traditional in structure, meter, and language (there is little of the innovation common in Brian Wren’s or Tom Troeger’s verse), the author makes effective use of dialogue between congregation and soloist in “When Did We See You Hungry, Lord?” to the tune MARYTON (“O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee”). Again there is a subtle link between Matt 25:37–39 and the social justice text by Washington Gladden usually associated with this tune.

In conclusion, I affirm the goals that Gillette has set for herself. I would encourage her to continue to develop her craft by attending hymn-writing workshops, such as those sponsored by The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada. Though I have some specific reservations, I believe that many congregations will find much of value here. This book may also serve as a model for those in local congregations who have a latent ability to write hymns. The publisher allows these texts to be printed in orders of worship (one-time use) and for educational purposes without requesting permission.

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